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MARCH 2025

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"This is the last survivor of the Empire *Christmas drinks"*

Peter Strain, Marco Vittur

EMPIRE
WELCOME

I DON'T KNOW about you, but I wasn't expecting to end last year being scared silly by a 122-year-old poem. Yet when the teaser trailer for Danny Boyle's *28 Years Later* landed, complete with a recital of Rudyard Kipling's anti-war ode 'Boots', that's exactly what happened.

"Don't — don't — don't — don't look at what's in front of you," rumbled a haunted, scratchy voice (actor Taylor Holmes, recorded in 1915), as we got glimpses of a UK beset by flesh-hungry monsters. "Boots — boots — boots — boots movin' up an' down again/ Men — men — men — men — men go mad with watchin' em/An' there's no discharge in the war!"

It made for the most inspired and powerful trailer of 2024, and despite the advice of Kipling, it's also made us desperate to look at what's in front of us (even if we go mad from watchin' it): a horror threequel that's many years — though not quite 28 — in the making. Inside this issue we are excited to present the very first interviews anywhere on the film, our Olly Richards speaking to Boyle and writer Alex Garland, plus stars Ralph Fiennes, Jodie Comer and Aaron Taylor-Johnson, to discover what's in store. And yes, we talked about *that* infected ghoul, our cover star this month, who is emphatically *not* Cillian Murphy.

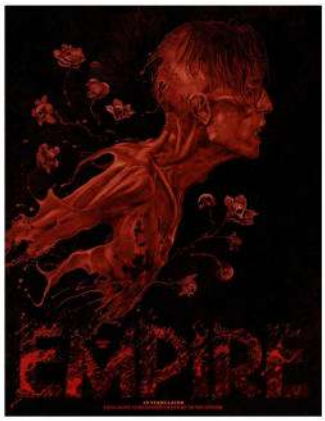
In other exciting threequel news, this issue begins an unprecedented deep dive into *Avatar: Fire And Ash*, James Cameron's incoming sci-fi adventure. The follow-up to two of the biggest movies in history is still 11

months away, but we'll be charting its journey to the screen with world-exclusive access in every issue throughout 2025, kicking things off with an epic interview with Cameron himself. Join us on what we're calling the Path To Pandora — you won't even need to plug yourself into a great leonopteryx.

Also inside the issue: Pamela Anderson, Ke Huy Quan, *Mission: Impossible — The Final Reckoning* and much, much more. Fill your boots.

Nick

NICK DE SEMLYEN
EDITOR
@nickdesemlyen



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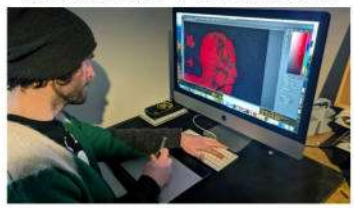

This month's exclusive subscriber cover by Peter Strain
A long-time collaborator with *Empire*, Belfast-based Peter is known for his humour, cultural savvy and highly distinctive, bold designs — so who better to create this intense, striking image in tribute to Danny Boyle's latest?

TURN TO PAGE 10 TO LEARN HOW TO SIGN UP FOR AN *EMPIRE* SUBSCRIPTION

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THE BRUTALIST

DIRECTED BY BRADY CORBET

IN CINEMAS JANUARY 24

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9 CRITICS CHOICE NOMINATIONS INCLUDING BEST ACTOR - ADRIEN BRODY

★★★★★ FINANCIAL TIMES

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★★★★★ HEYUGUYS

EMPIRE

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DISPATCHES

TEAM EMPIRE ON A FEW OF OUR HIGH POINTS THIS MONTH

OLLY RICHARDS TALKED INFECTED WITH THE *28 YEARS LATER* GANG
"You can feel the history between Danny Boyle and Alex Garland. In the 23 years that separate *28 Days Later* and *28 Years Later*, their relationship has evolved and there's a real ease between them; a confidence in their instincts. I'd have happily talked for another 28 hours."

JOANNA MORAN ORGANISED OUR KE HUY QUAN PHOTOSHOOT
"Shooting Ke in LA with photographer extraordinaire Art Streiber was such a blast! He jumped into the day with such enthusiasm and good humour. This shot was him taking one of his trademark selfies as he swung down our zip-line on a gentleman's umbrella. As you do."

ALEX GODFREY HOSTED A *SPEAK NO EVIL* SUMMIT
"I love Christian Tafdrup's *Speak No Evil* (2022). It's gleefully bleak. And I love James Watkins' *Speak No Evil* (2024). It's gleefully nasty. Getting the directors together to unpack both films was gleeful all round: one big, incongruously happy celebration of two masterful slabs of horror."

Ke Huy Quan, Imago. Spine lines issue 436: Newsstand: "My Captain America! Dad! Dad! Dad!" is from *The Pursuit Of Happyness*. Subs: "Your boy Captain America over here. The best of the best of the best, sir!" is from *Men In Black*

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EMPIRE COMMENT

LETTER OF THE MONTH

DON'T YANK THE RANK

As a longterm reader (starting way back in '89 with the Batman-flavoured issue #2), *Empire* remains an integral part of my passion for movies. I don't normally have cause for complaint, but I was a little disappointed to see 'The Ranking' missing in January's issue [issue #435]. Come on, guys, it *is* the season of goodwill. In the almost-words of Winston Wolf: pretty please, with sugar on top — reinstate the feature.

AID DAWSON, VIA EMAIL

Fear not, Aid — The Ranking was merely taking a brief rest, to make space for our massive 2025 Preview. It made a triumphant return in issue #436 and can be found, safe and sound, in this issue on page 102. As a thanks for your concern, have a Picturehouse membership on us.

Picturehouse

Empire's star letter wins a Picturehouse Membership, valid for one year at all Picturehouse Cinemas across the UK, including the flagship Picturehouse Central in London's West End. The Membership comes pre-loaded with five free tickets, and gets you access to exclusive discounts on food, snacks and drinks. When you write to us, please include your full contact details so we can arrange delivery of your prize.

ON THE *KARATE KID: LEGENDS* TRAILER: Karate Kid: Into The No Way Home To Your Dojo-Verse.

STEVEN AWALT

HE'LL BE BACK

Great articles on *The Terminator* ['40 Years Of The Terminator' cover story, issue #433]. Michael Biehn offered much of the film's humanity, and delivers the film's best line — often attributed to ex-girlfriends, lol — "It can't be reasoned with, it can't be bargained with, it has no fear, no pity, no remorse, and will not stop, ever, until you are dead!"

STEPHEN CONN, NEW MEXICO

Not going to lie: we are a bit worried about your ex-girlfriends now, Stephen.

I REALLY enjoyed reading Alex Godfrey's interview with *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* showrunner Josh Friedman. Great to hear Josh share so much!

@ERNIEESTRELLA.BSKY.SOCIAL

ANTIQUES ROADSHOW

On a recent trip to Stratford-upon-Avon, the wife and I visited an antique shop. We got talking to an American who worked there. Turned out he used to work in Hollywood. Worked with everyone: Stallone, Arnie, Willis, Costner, as an extra or stand-in. His favourite was Whitney Houston.

ANDREW PEAT, WATERBEACH

Nice to learn that the home of the Bard is also the home of extras from The Bodyguard.

THE BIG QUESTION

THIS MONTH WE ASKED:
WHAT MOVIE-BASED NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION DO YOU HAVE FOR 2025?

Watch more movies.
@DAVEYH39.BSKY.SOCIAL

Getting my *Avatar* body and uniting the clans in the fight against the Sky People.
@SHIPSCREW UNSCREWER.BSKY.SOCIAL

I only managed eight of *Empire*'s top 20 films of 2024 — I'd like to get at least ten this year!
@DAMIEN-A-P.BSKY.SOCIAL

As a horror fan, the *Friday The 13th* series is my most egregious blindspot, so I intend to finally get through that series.
@RODDERSJ04.BSKY.SOCIAL

I will be doing my damnedest to contain the will of Satan inside metal balls inserted into dolls' heads, and give them out as gifts.
@GRANTLEYBUFFALO.BSKY.SOCIAL

WATCH OUT FOR THE NEXT QUESTION VIA OUR BLUESKY ACCOUNT: @EMPIREMAGAZINE.BSKY.SOCIAL

PREVIOUSLY, IN EMPIRE...

28 DAYS LATER FEATURE NOVEMBER 2002

28 Years Later adorns our cover this issue. But 23 years ago, we went big on Danny Boyle's original Brit-horror classic. Of the film's genesis, writer Alex Garland offered, "I had an idea about a zombie movie where the zombies ran. But there were lots of things playing into that — George A. Romero, *The Day Of The Triffids*, the *Resident Evil* games... The genre humour that ran through it had something in common with *Starship Troopers*."

It would become a much more serious work, the film's opening scenes of a deserted London involving some guerilla filmmaking. "I was up on top of St Thomas' Hospital," producer Andrew Macdonald told us. "Terrorist police asked me to move on because I could see across the gates into Downing Street." Happily, no producers (or PMs) were harmed; only monsters.

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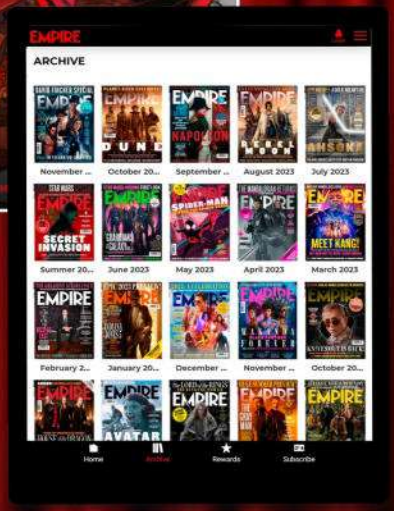

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first word

ALL THE ESSENTIAL INTEL, FROM HOLLYWOOD AND BEYOND

MARCH 2025 | EDITED BY **BETH WEBB**

Ready to go back?

WE'VE LEARNED THE WAY OF WATER. NOW, JAMES CAMERON IS TURNING UP THE HEAT WITH AVATAR: FIRE AND ASH

WORDS **NICK DE SEMLYEN**

WHEN *EMPIRE* IS patched into a Zoom with James Cameron, it's on 18 December — 15 years to the day since *Avatar* was first released. But he's not marking the occasion with blue balloons or a tulkun-shaped cake. He's got the follow-up to the most successful movie in history, plus the third-most successful movie in history, keeping him busy. "Oh, good point. I didn't even realise that milestone was upon us," he says. "I've spent the last three days pulling all-nighters, getting the film ready to screen for Disney. Dealing with the sound and all that. Getting all perfectionist-nerdy about the presentation."

Even 12 months out from release, Cameron is working overtime on making sure *Fire And Ash* scorches our faces off. He's taking an hour out of his schedule, though, to give *Empire* the world's first extensive interview on the biggest cinematic event of 2025. Kicking off a year of unprecedented coverage, in which we'll be charting the creation of the film throughout every issue, he tells us how he's changing the game on Pandora.

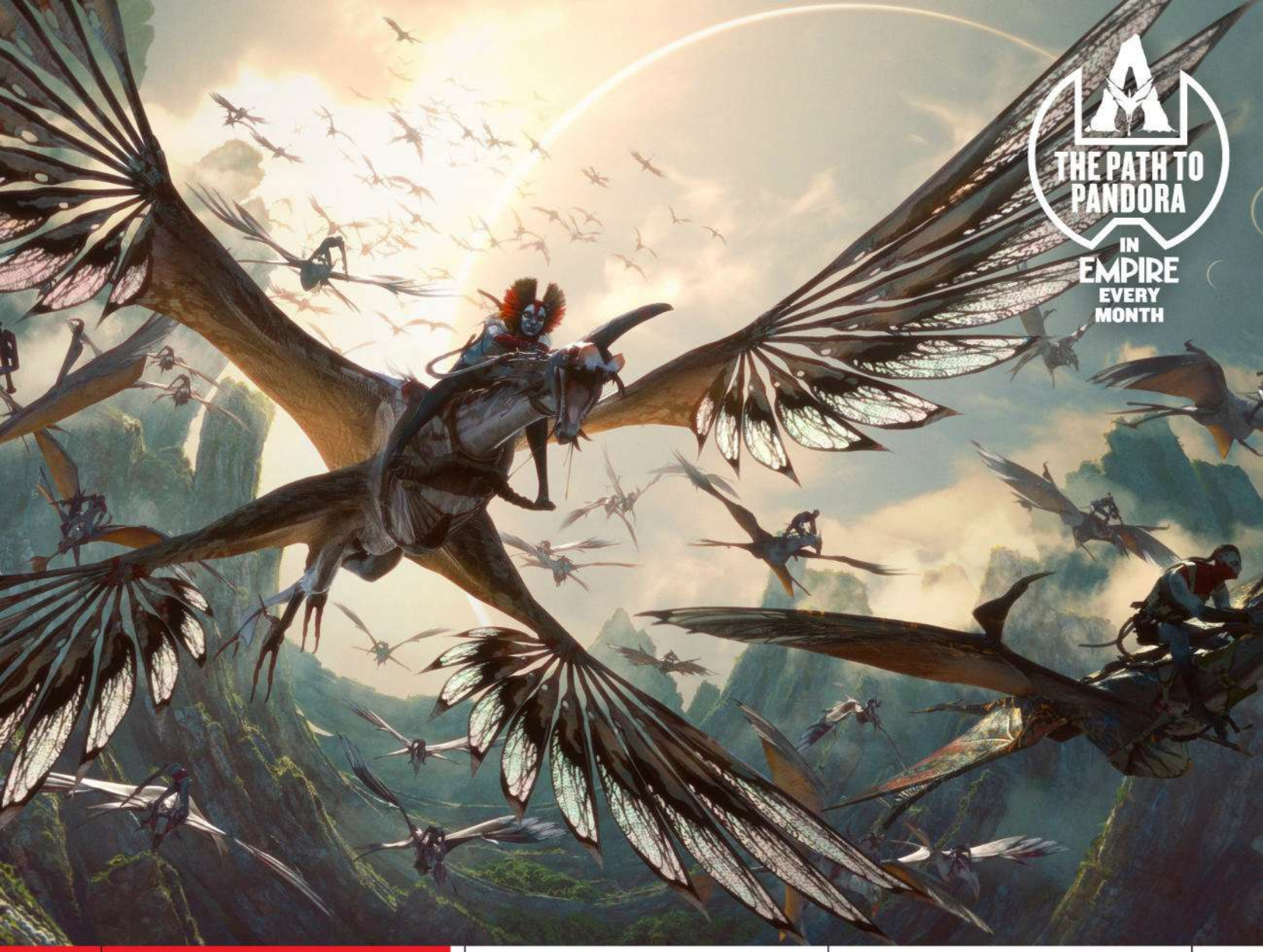
So, what shape is the film in?
It's in strong shape, I think. I feel really good about it, at least on a scene-by-scene basis. I haven't watched it myself from end to end in about a year, and the last time it made me want to vomit. But that's always a good reaction, the first time you screen a film for yourself. Because then you get really rigorous and disciplined about making it work. We've doubled the number of shots finished at this stage of the game than we had on movie two [and] the films are about equal length. So that puts us well ahead of the curve, which is something I've never, frankly, experienced before. (*Laughs*) It's always a last-minute fricking nightmare on these films with a million details. It's a little bit less nightmarish. We're getting to the point where we're actually getting good at this.

Nausea but not nightmarish — sounds like a decent place to be in.
Look, there's no baby born without labour. Just some labours are not as severe as others.

You've set the bar in Hollywood for sequels. But this is your first threequel. Does it feel different?
I was involved creatively on [*Terminator:*] *Dark Fate*, and that obviously didn't work out so well. But as director, this is my first threequel. The long-play bet here is that we get people to care more about the characters than about the shock of the new. Each of the two films that people have seen already, the promise was, "We're going to show you new environments, new creatures, new species, and you're going to get to just inhabit a world." And we fulfilled that promise. The shift going into 3 is, "Yeah, there'll be plenty of new things to enjoy, but our [focus] really is on the characters, the throughline of their story." It's a different kind of engagement with the audience. And obviously we're betting a lot of money that it will work.

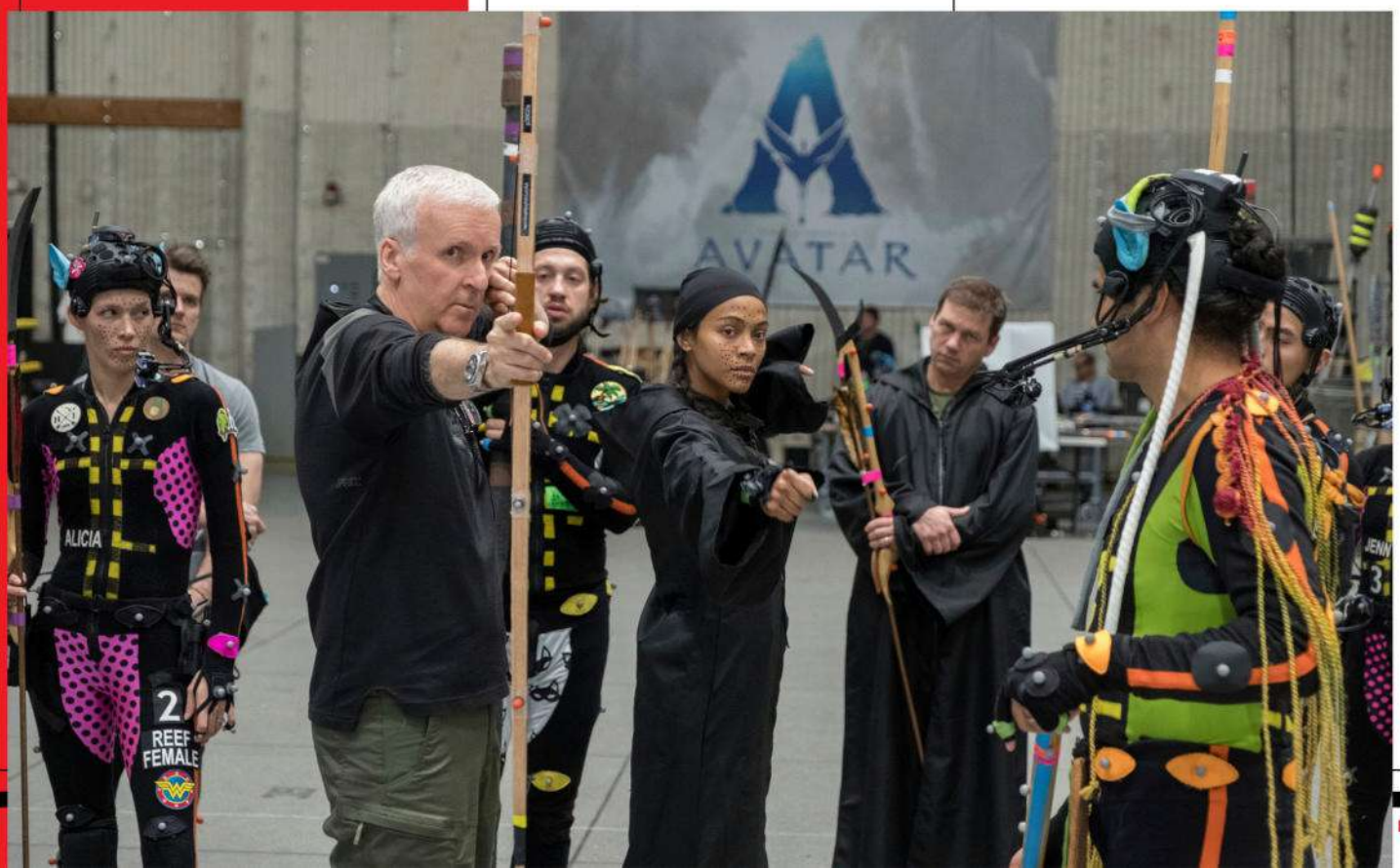
The title, *Fire And Ash*, seems to speak to an amped-up emotional intensity. The Sullys were left devastated by *The Way Of Water*'s final act...
The exact quote, which is in the voiceover, is, "The fire of hate gives way to the ash of grief." I think what commercial Hollywood doesn't do well is deal with grief the way human beings really deal with it. You know, characters get killed off, and then in the next movie everybody's happy again. I've lost a lot of people, friends and family members, over the last six ›

Right: Concept art of the Ash Warriors riding ikran, Varang (centre) in the thick of the action. **Below:** Cast members with director James Cameron, a man with many strings to his bow.



THE PATH TO PANDORA

IN EMPIRE EVERY MONTH



Right: Concept art of the Wind Traders, their ships powered by two aquatic Pandoran beasts. **Below:** Cameron and Stephen Lang prep a scene.

or eight years, and it doesn't work that way. It also doesn't make you so mad that you're going to become an army of one and gun up and kill all those motherfuckers, which is another Hollywood trope. It makes you just kind of depressed and fucked up. I'm not saying our movie's depressed and fucked up, I'm just saying that I think we deal with that part of life quite honestly. The [Sullys'] journey continues in a very naturalistic, novelistic way. I've sort of thought of this next cycle, meaning 3, 4 and 5, as how they continue to process the things that happen to them. Now, of course, they're not human, but this is a movie for us, by us, right? Science-fiction is always just a big mirror of the human condition.

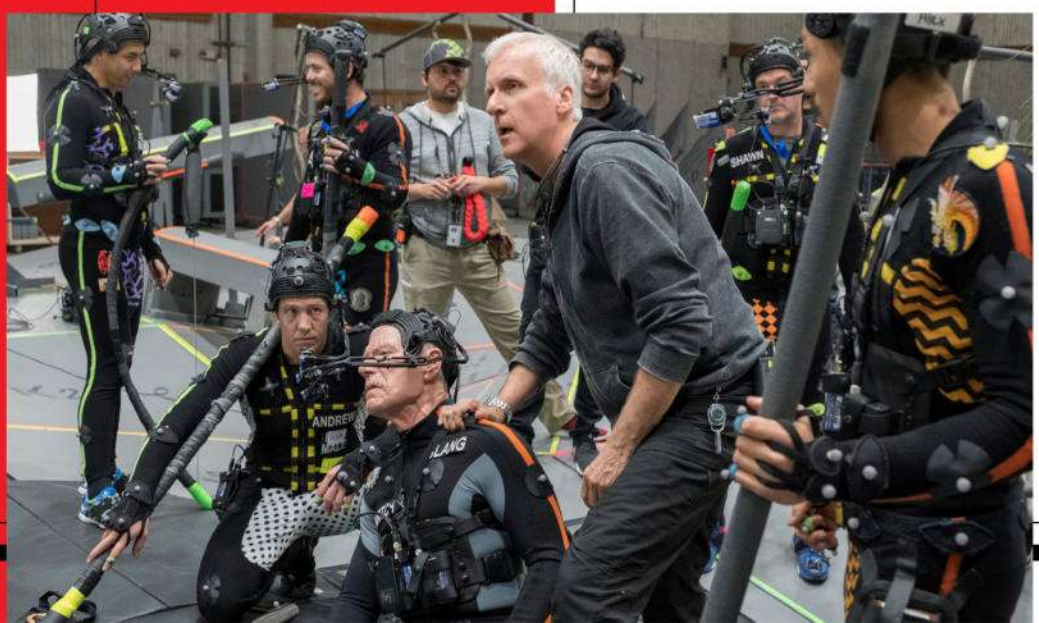
In this film, you're introducing another clan of Na'vi, the Ash People, with a leader named Varang.
I don't want to say too much about her, but what I can say is that Oona Chaplin, who plays her, is so good that I didn't quite appreciate how good her performance is until we got the Wētā animation back. At a certain point, the nuance and detail of the performance suddenly popped to full life. She was absolutely precise in every word, every gesture, every eye movement. She's an enemy, an adversarial character, but [Chaplin] makes her feel so real and alive.

What else can you say about the Ash People?
Varang is the leader of a people who have gone through an incredible hardship. She's hardened by that. She will do anything for them, even things that we would consider to be evil. One thing we wanted to do in this film is not be black-and-white simplistic. Or blue-and-pink simplistic. From the Na'vi perspective, all humans are pink — they call them 'pinkskins', and they're not discriminating between light brown, dark brown, pink, whatever. So there's a racism element from the Na'vi perspective that we introduce. We're trying to evolve beyond the "all humans are bad, all Na'vi are good" paradigm.

What other new elements of Pandora will we see?
Early on in *Fire And Ash*, we meet a group called the Wind Traders. They're nomadic traders, equivalent to the camel caravans of the Spice Road back in the Middle Ages. And you know, they're just fun. Like all Na'vi, they live in a symbiosis with their creatures. One is the medusoid, like a jellyfish, able to generate hydrogen gas: they're kind of giant, living soap bubbles, 500 feet tall. The Wind Traders have coupled them with this other creature, the windray, which uses this kind of stingray-like, sinusoidal motion to propel itself around. [It's] kind of like a tug boat, or a tow vehicle. We show that feeling of the crew pushing off and getting the journey started, catching the wind, all that stuff... If you've got any nautical blood in your veins, you'll want to be on that ship.

***The Way Of Water* shifted focus somewhat away from the humans and the RDA. Is it fair to say they'll be coming back in force?**
Oh yeah. Now they're not only after unobtanium, they're after amrita (*the priceless liquid extracted from dead tulkun, which has the power to stop humans ageing*). Amrita is driving their economy. And General Ardmore [played by Edie Falco] is essentially running the whole thing under military rule, in the grand tradition of the colonial era, where the military is really just corporate security writ large. We're talking about a sort of colonial-era metaphor where the British and the French are using some of the indigenous tribes as allies against other indigenous tribes. You start to see that taking place in movie 3. It's very much a colonial era, just an interstellar version of it. I'm kind of a history buff. And history has this annoying tendency of repeating itself, if you don't pay attention to it.

Finally, what's exciting you most about this movie, one year out?
What I'm excited about is to take the audience into places they won't expect, but that will feel earned. Yeah, we've got some really clever action set-pieces. You can get your blood up in this movie. But what excites me as an artist who recently turned 70 and has kind of done all that



stuff is not only the opportunity to get to do it again, but to get to a level of character and intrigue you haven't seen before in an *Avatar* movie. [The original] was a story that encourages cultural immersion and truly seeing other people, other ways of life, other ways of thought. And we don't lose any of that. We're just starting to riff on it and twist it and turn it. It's a tricky thing. We could be getting high on our own supply here, and everybody who looks at it goes, "Fuck, that's not what I signed up for." But if you're not making brave choices, you're wasting everybody's time and money. That alone is not sufficient to create success, but it's necessary. You've got to break the mould every fricking time.

***AVATAR: FIRE AND ASH* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 19 DECEMBER**

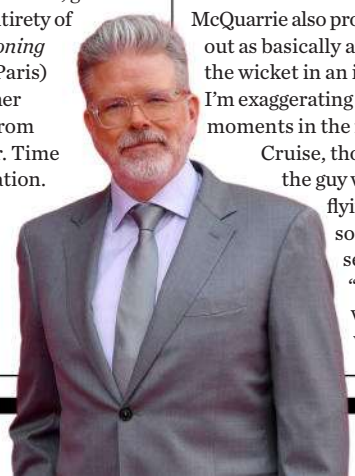
It's the end of the world and they know it

CHRISTOPHER McQUARRIE INTRODUCES THE NEW TEAM AT THE HEART OF MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE — THE FINAL RECKONING

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

WHEN IT COMES to line-ups, the IMF (Impossible Mission Force, not International Monetary Fund) has seen many makeovers. Tom Cruise's Ethan Hunt is the captain, of course. But since the first *Mission: Impossible* movie back in 1996 butchered most of its team in the first 20 minutes, new faces have come and gone with alarming regularity.

Ever since Christopher McQuarrie took over the franchise as director, however, the IMF has stayed relatively static. When the chips are down, Ethan's been able to rely upon Simon Pegg's Benji Dunn, Ving Rhames' Luther Stickell, and Rebecca Ferguson's Ilsa Faust. Now, though, with the advent of *Mission: Impossible — The Final Reckoning*, Ethan and Benji are going to be joined by three new faces — Hayley Atwell's Grace, Greg Tarzan Davis' Degas, and Pom Klementieff's Paris. Well, technically they're old faces, given one of them (Degas) spent the entirety of previous instalment *Dead Reckoning* hunting Ethan down, another (Paris) was trying to kill him, and the other (Grace) was trying to get away from him. Yet, here they are, together. Time to ask McQuarrie for an explanation. "I can only say that the end of the world makes strange bedfellows," he teases. "And I'm excited for people to see the evolution of Paris, Degas and Grace."



For once, the legendarily loquacious McQ is being coy. Understandable when *The Final Reckoning*, the eighth and possibly last instalment of the *Mission* series, is still a few months away. But it's a safe bet that the Entity, the AI villain who gummed up the works for everyone last time, is still posing a clear and present danger that prompts Ethan to recruit outside the box. The line-up pictured above seems fit for any impossible mission — they've got a tech wizard (Benji), a confidence trickster (Grace), two battering rams who can run all day (Degas and Paris), and, of course, in Ethan Hunt, someone who can do all those things without breaking a sweat. But McQuarrie says he hasn't approached it that way. "*Mission* has a mind of its own," he explains of cracking the story. "If you say, 'I want a character who does this,' you'll be disappointed. If, however, you approach it obliquely, the movie will reward you, and you will find yourself doing things you never thought you would."

The film's trailer suggests that Degas and Paris, as the youngest members of the team, will do their fair share of fighting ("There's no way I would have cast Pom in *Dead Reckoning* if that was the be all and end all of that character"). But McQuarrie also promises that Benji, who started out as basically an intern in *M:I-3*, will come to the wicket in an interesting way. "I don't think I'm exaggerating to say it contains Simon's best moments in the franchise," he hints.

Cruise, though, remains the main man, the guy who'll be running, jumping, flying, swimming, and running some more, including in one sequence that McQuarrie says "was the most difficult thing we've ever done. Ever". Which, when you consider what Cruise

has done for this franchise, is saying something. If this is the gravity -defying star's last outing (and McQuarrie is staying tight-lipped about that), he could be going out on a high. "We had a small screening," says McQuarrie, "and someone said, 'I was suffocating throughout the entire sequence. I almost had a heart attack.' And I thought, 'I guess we did something right.'" IMF may look a little different, but they're still not messing around.

***MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE — THE FINAL RECKONING* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 21 MAY**

Clockwise from main: The fresh team set forth; Benji (Simon Pegg) and Ethan (Tom Cruise); Erika (Angela Bassett); Sharp move; Christopher McQuarrie.

Illustration: Russell Moorcroft

NEED TO KNOW

GET UP TO SPEED ON... MOTHER MARY

HAIL MARY, DAVID LOWERY IS BACK

The filmmaker's epic melodrama will reportedly explore the twisted romantic relationship between Anne Hathaway's pop superstar, the titular Mother Mary, and Michaela Coel's fashion designer tasked with creating a dress for the idol. Plot details are scant but Lowery revealed that he showed Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* to his cast and crew during production, suggesting some gothic opulence to come.

IT STARTED OUT A MUCH SMALLER FILM

Intent on changing course after making large-scale Disney adaptation *Peter Pan And Wendy*, Lowery originally set out to shoot a simple two-hander for his next film. Yet once he landed on a pop-star protagonist, the story became grander and stranger, with the director describing it as "a weird, weird film" and "the hardest thing I've ever done", hinting that the story will begin in a stadium setting.

IT TRANSFORMED ANNE HATHAWAY

The actor won an Oscar for belting out 'I Dreamed A Dream' in *Les Misérables*, but playing a chart-topping sensation was still daunting. "I hadn't been a student like this in a really long time," she told *Vanity Fair*. "[I thought], 'I can't do this. I can't dance. I can't sing like a pop star.'" Lowery and the crew, however, helped to bring her to 'Mother' status. Among them was Bina Daigeler, the costume designer for *TÁR*, who created the character's fierce attire — an early look at the character shows Hathaway in a Gaga-worthy, head-to-toe gold ensemble.

SOME KILLER COLLABORATORS ARE ON BOARD

Charli XCX is fast becoming Hollywood's hottest ticket, so it's no wonder that she's been recruited to write original songs for the film, presumably to be performed by its onscreen pop star. XCX joined forces with Jack Antonoff for the project, who has collaborated with everyone from Taylor Swift to Lorde alongside his band Bleachers. 'Brat: Hathaway's Version', anyone?

THERE WERE HARDCORE EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

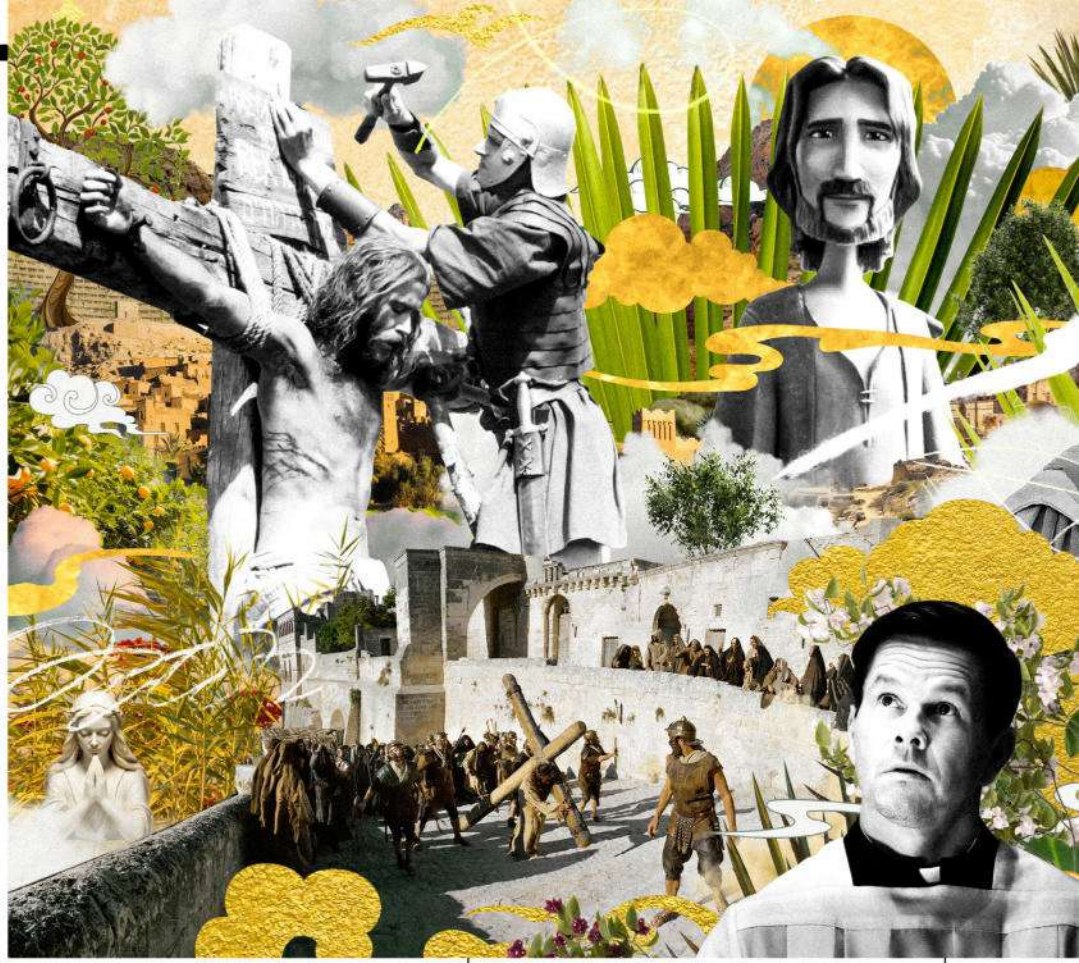
Hunter Schafer joins *Warrior Nun*'s Alba Baptista in the supporting cast, reportedly playing Coel's character's assistant, Hilda. During the film's shoot in Cologne in 2023, the pair found an appropriate way to blow off steam. "I actually ended up in a bit of a mosh pit," Coel recalled. "Me and Hunter Schafer were out. Neither of us had earrings on so it was safe. And we ended up having a really beautiful experience." Keep your eyes peeled at festivals this summer; Team *Mother Mary* may be representing. **LAURA VENNING**

***MOTHER MARY* DOES NOT YET HAVE A UK RELEASE DATE**

Hollywood gets the faith

EMPIRE INVESTIGATES WHY CHRISTIAN CINEMA IS ON THE RISE

WORDS **JOHN NUGENT**



THE POWER OF Christ has compelled cinema for a long time. But things are changing in what is called "faith-based" cinema: the quality and quantity of Christian filmmaking seems to be increasing, exponentially. "It's become much more sophisticated," says Thomas Bonifield, editor of *ChristianFilmBlog.com* and director of 2020's family caper *Miracle On Christmas*. "Christian movies have had a reputation for being cheesy and fairly amateurish in terms of their production values. But that has changed."

While there remains plenty of cheap-and-cheerful-and-churchgoing films, religious content is now attracting bigger budgets, mainstream studio distribution, and A-list talent. Sony has a Christian division, Affirm Films; Lionsgate has partnered with Christian production company Kingdom Story Company; Mark Wahlberg has said he is focusing on faith-based work after putting millions of dollars into 2022's biographical drama *Father Stu*. (Having household names involved "adds some legitimacy to the movie", thinks Bonifield. "It opens the door a little wider for people who might be otherwise disinclined to go see a Christian movie.")

The streamers are getting involved, too. Prime Video is producing Biblical series *House Of David*, while Netflix recently released virgin-mother origin-story *Mary* (starring Anthony Hopkins as a scenery-chewing King Herod), and has also signed a multi-year deal with über-producers Tyler Perry and DeVon Franklin to produce faith-based films. "The Bible, to me, is still an untapped resource for stories," Franklin tells *Empire*. "So it's great that Netflix is taking an industry-leading position. I think there is a huge demand for this kind of storytelling."

Franklin and Perry are producing *R&B*, a modern-day retelling of the Biblical love story of Ruth and Boaz, just one of a clutch of Christian-themed movies due in 2025. There's also *The*

THE PIPELINE

EIGHT PROJECTS IN DEVELOPMENT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT

WORDS **JORDAN KING**

SUPERGIRL: WOMAN OF TOMORROW

Jason Momoa will play alien bounty-hunter Lobo in Craig Gillespie's upcoming DC movie. He joins Milly Alcock's Kara Zor-El and Matthias Schoenaerts' big bad Krem of the Yellow Hills in the film, which is currently due to hit cinemas on 26 June 2026.

VERITY

Dakota Johnson and Josh Hartnett have been cast alongside Anne Hathaway in Michael Showalter's adaptation of Colleen Hoover's bestseller. The plot follows Lowen Ashleigh (Johnson), a struggling writer embroiled in the affairs of missing thriller author Verity Crawford (Hathaway) and her husband Jeremy (Hartnett).

THE KNIGHT

Nosferatu director **Robert Eggers** has multiple irons in the fire — a Rasputin mini-series and a Western among them. But in a recent interview, the filmmaker revealed he's just finished writing his first medieval epic, which, having been delayed twice before, could now be his next project.

Left: Joy to the world! An array of Christian film content awaits. **Below:** Josh Newell (left) and the Jesus Film Project aim to spread the Christian word to as many people as possible.

King Of Kings, an animation about the life of Jesus (voiced by Oscar Isaac) — as told, curiously, by Charles Dickens (voiced by Kenneth Branagh); Biblical drama *The Last Supper*, released in time for Easter; and the long-gestating sequel to *The Passion Of The Christ*, which — despite director Mel Gibson's tarnished reputation, and star Jim Caviezel's admiration for conspiracy theories — promises to be another huge hit. "That's the 800-lb-gorilla in the room," says Bonifield. "Compared to run-of-the-mill Christian movies, it's in another league completely."

What is behind the current boom? It might be "spiritual curiosity", according to Josh

Newell, executive director of the nonprofit Jesus Film Project, which aims to translate the vintage 1979 faith-based film *Jesus* into as many languages as possible. For Newell and others, the mission is explicitly evangelistic: using cinema to win over as many hearts and minds as possible. The 1979 film, the Project claims, has been viewed over eight billion times (this claim, it should be noted, is unverified); production is afoot on an animated adaptation, due later this year. "The story of Jesus is for everyone," Newell says, noting that the film helps their mission in places where "illiteracy is still a huge problem".

But others are more indirect in their message. Franklin hopes that "anyone who loves a good movie, anyone who loves a good love story" will watch *R&B*. There is also an opportunity, he says, for religious storytelling to become more multicultural. The genre has had a shaky reputation in this regard — *The Passion Of The Christ* was accused of antisemitism when it was first released — but *R&B*, a love story about two African-Americans in modern-day Atlanta, hopes to redress the balance. "We feel like [*R&B*] is going to tap into an audience that is underserved," he says. "The faith space is more diverse than people realise."

Ultimately, God is big business. "There's one stat that's bandied about in Christian circles that there's something like 120 million people a week going to church in America pretty consistently," Bonifield notes (though sources differ on this number). "That's an enormous quantity of people. If you're able to get even a fraction of that to show up in theatres, you're off to the races." This year's most bankable movie hero may not be Superman or Captain America — it could be Jesus Christ.

BANANAS

Ana de Armas and Oscar Isaac will lead David O. Russell's new Apple TV+ drama. Written and created by *Orange Is The New Black* and *Narcos*' Carolina Paiz, the hush-hush series — De Armas' English-language TV debut — reportedly revolves around 'banana republics', aka economically unstable nations.

MASTERS OF THE UNIVERSE

Jared Leto has landed the role of Skeletor in Travis Knight's upcoming He-Man movie. He'll star opposite Nicholas Galitzine's Prince Adam in Knight's Chris Butler (*ParaNorman*)-penned live-action take on the cult cartoon, which is currently slated for release on 5 June 2026.

TEENAGE SEX AND DEATH AT CAMP MIASMA

Jane Schoenbrun's (*I Saw The TV Glow*) next movie will follow a queer director who's hired to direct a long-running slasher franchise's latest sequel. The movie, described as "*Portrait Of A Lady On Fire* set in a *Friday The 13th* sequel," is shooting imminently.

AMERICAN PSYCHO

Austin Butler is stepping into Christian Bale's shoes to play Patrick Bateman in Luca Guadagnino's fresh take on the classic American novel. Scott Z. Burns is tackling the script for this, the latest screen take on Bret Easton Ellis' satirical study of a wealthy, serial-killing investment banker.

BRIDES

Maika Monroe is teaming up with *Watcher* director Chloe Okuno on her new horror joint. Starting shooting this March, the movie follows Sally Bishop (Monroe) and her husband, whose Italian getaway derails when their villa's owner, a mysterious count, demonstrates an unnerving interest in Sally.

Getty Images, Imago

An insider's guide to Tinseltown

IN NEW SERIES THE STUDIO, SETH ROGEN DELVES INTO THE CHAOTIC WORLD OF MOVIEMAKING

WORDS **OLLY RICHARDS**

SETH ROGEN HAS spent decades in Hollywood as an actor, writer and director. In his new show, *The Studio*, he switches sides. The sitcom, made with long-time collaborator Evan Goldberg, sees Rogen play Matt Remick, a movie-studio head who's torn between his love of film and the shareholders' love of profit. As (real) filmmaker and (fake) exec, Rogen offers his thoughts on how to find success in Hollywood.

TRUST THAT PEOPLE MEAN WELL

"There's a line I say in the first episode, which is something an executive said: 'I got into this because I love movies, and now my job is to ruin them.'" Rogen has clashed with studio suits, but says most do want to make good things: they're just often not allowed to. "They're at an inflection point between art and commerce. They love film and filmmakers... and it became funny to us that these people are put in a position where they have to alienate the exact people that inspired them."

DON'T TAKE NO FOR AN ANSWER

The cast of *The Studio* is ridiculous, with guest roles for, to name a few, Charlize Theron, Steve Buscemi and Martin Scorsese. "We often painted

ourselves into a corner, because the part was very specific to a particular person," Rogen says. He and Goldberg made no plan B; they just concentrated on writing parts that were so fun, nobody would refuse. "If you give them a good joke, they [want to do it]. We made sure even the briefest appearances would get a big laugh."

TRY TO MAKE BAD IDEAS WORK

One episode sees Remick trying to make a Kool-Aid movie, at his boss's insistence. Rogen has been in plenty of meetings where he's been asked to turn drinks/boardgames/phone apps into movies. He says dismissing those pitches is foolish. "Honestly, my first instinct is to [try to]

Clockwise from main: Movie-studio head Matt Remick (Seth Rogen); Chatting with the legendary Martin Scorsese; Schmoozing with an elegant Rebecca Hall; Evan Goldberg and Rogen on set; Excitable execs played by Ike Barinholtz, Kathryn Hahn, Rogen and Chase Sui Wonders.

make it work. It's very appealing to have someone present you with a movie they actually want to make... Knowing they're enthusiastic about spending money, you think, 'Maybe I could make the fancy, great, Oscar-winning Monopoly movie!'"

DON'T ALWAYS TRY TO BE THE BEST IN THE ROOM

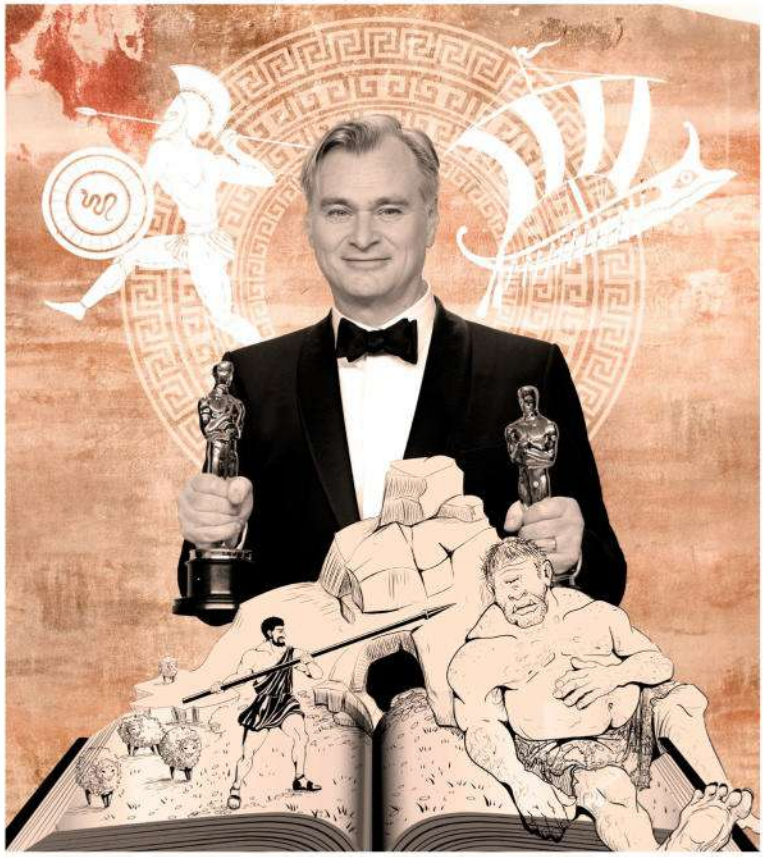
Rogen has spent years developing as a filmmaker, but even when you're in charge, you can still be humbled. For example, when directing one of the greatest living filmmakers. "I'm on a very strange shortlist of people who have directed Martin Scorsese," says Rogen, who made his peace with the fact his 'actor' could probably direct the scene better than him. "He could see us figuring it out from time to time and, I think, was biting his tongue and wishing he could take over." He laughs. "I would have taken it, honestly."

ALWAYS SAY THANK YOU

While writing the show, Rogen and Goldberg met with "almost every person who runs a studio in Hollywood" to ask what it's actually like being in charge. One theme kept coming up. "It was a common thread among studio executives that they want to be thanked," says Rogen. "They're very connected to these films, but their name isn't on the movie!" So they wrote an episode specifically about Remick wanting credit in a Golden Globes speech. "People just want to be thanked!" Even when they run the whole show.

THE STUDIO **IS ON APPLE TV+ FROM 26 MARCH**

Getty Images, Imago



CHRISTOPHER NOLAN'S MOST EPIC EPIC YET

IN SURPRISE NEWS, THE FILMMAKER IS TAKING ON THE ODYSSEY — YET THE MATERIAL IS BAKED INTO HIS DNA

OVER THE PAST few months, the rumour mill ground out entertainingly diverse possibilities for Christopher Nolan's 13th movie. A 1920s vampire horror? A spy thriller? A remake of high-tech-helicopter cop flick *Blue Thunder*? That none of these were close shouldn't have surprised us (Nolan would never let a secret out). Instead, the surprise was that the confirmed next movie felt even less likely than some of the guesses: an adaptation of Homer's *The Odyssey*, a mythic poem written around 2,700 years ago. All Nolan's films have been set either in the modern era or the not-too-distant future, so a swords-and-sandals tale — complete with gods, sirens, a witch, a cyclops and a six-headed monster — seems like a colossal pivot.

However, if you look beyond the genre, the Odyssey is in fact *very* Nolan. The 24-book poem starts in the middle and uses flashbacks, which certainly speaks to his preference for timeline-messing. And it is, essentially, the story of a man (Odysseus) sent far away from his home (the kingdom of Ithaca) by his job (fighting the Trojan War), who then has to make a long and torturous journey home to his family (wife Penelope and son Telemachus). Just like *Inception* and, even more closely, *Interstellar* — his two most personal films, inspired in part by his professed guilt at spending so much time away from his kids while working. *Dunkirk* is also driven by a treacherous nautical homeward quest, while *Batman Begins* features its own years-long heroic wander, as Bruce Wayne yomps around the world (and underworld) during its opening act.

Then there's the more fundamental fact that Nolan always likes to go *big*. And what's bigger than one of the foundational adventure narratives? Especially when it's gonna be tackled The Nolan Way: on a megabucks, global-location-shoot tour, with, we're told, "brand-new IMAX film technology" and that definitive preference for in-camera effects —even if it does turn out to be a full-on monster movie. Not to mention a suitably starry ensemble, including Nolan pals like Matt Damon (rumoured to be playing Odysseus), Anne Hathaway and Robert Pattinson alongside new collaborators Tom Holland, Zendaya, Lupita Nyong'o and Charlize Theron. It's honestly hard to imagine cinema getting any huger. **DAN JOLIN**

THE ODYSSEY **IS IN CINEMAS FROM 17 JULY 2026**

The Spotlight

Geraldine Viswanathan

THE STAR OF *YOU'RE CORDIALLY INVITED* IS THRIVING WITH SOME HELP FROM HER COMEDY HEROES

WORDS **OLLY RICHARDS**

SAM McGUIRE

GERALDINE VISWANATHAN REMEMBERS a conversation with Ethan Coen that made her realise life was getting pretty weird. It was early 2024, and they were promoting *Drive-Away Dolls*, in which Coen directed her — already something she found ridiculous. "He said, 'Oh, Guillermo del Toro watched the movie and really liked your performance,'" she remembers, aghast. "The Australian in me wants to downplay everything and keep me humble and pretend none of this exists," she laughs. "I'm really trying to step into a more American mentality."

Viswanathan spent her early career doing stand-up and sketch comedy in Sydney, and travelled back and forth between Australia and America before her big Hollywood break came in 2018 with *Blockers*. Acting in the teen comedy about lifelong friends who make a pact to lose their virginity on prom night was a time she calls "the craziest year of my life. I went from working in a bowling alley to acting with John Cena." (He played her dad.)

Since then, she's flitted between roles in small, well-received dramas (*Hala*, *Bad Education*) and starry affairs (*The Beanie Bubble* and the aforementioned *Drive-Away Dolls*). Today, she's reached a stage in her career where she's going toe-to-toe with her comedy heroes.

In upcoming wedding caper *You're Cordially Invited*, Viswanathan stars as bride-to-be Jenni, whose coddling father Jim, played by Will Ferrell, inadvertently scuppers her big day. She'd idolised the *SNL* alumnus since her days growing up in New South Wales. "The two foundational texts of my youth are *Mean Girls* and *Step Brothers*," she enthuses. "At school we used so many *Step Brothers* quotes that it was basically a language in itself." Meeting Ferrell for the first time was enough to entirely freak out her inner-teenage self. "I was screaming and wearing my 'I LOVE

Above and right: Geraldine Viswanathan, photographed exclusively for *Empire* in Los Angeles on 15 December 2024. **Far right:** As bride-to-be Jenni in *You Are Cordially Invited*.

BETWEEN SCENES

OUR SPOTLIGHT STAR'S FAVOURITE STUFF

THE BOOK

***EVERYTHING I KNOW ABOUT LOVE* BY DOLLY ALDERTON**

"I was recently in Australia and had some beach time, so I was reading [it]. I ripped through that book so fast, and I am never a fast reader. It was delightful."

THE PODCAST

***TALK EASY* WITH SAM FRAGOSO**

"I'm not a huge podcast girl, but I do love an interview. Sam asks really insightful, thoughtful questions. You can tell the guests are really at ease."

THE ALBUM

***ALLIGATOR BITES NEVER HEAL* BY DOECHII**

"I'm just obsessed with her generally. I've had my eye on her for a long time and felt like she was coming up, but she's really having her moment now."

WILL FERRELL' T-shirt, so he got that I was a fan," she says. She's joking. We're 95 per cent sure she's joking.

Anxious as she was about performing with Ferrell, Viswanathan felt prepped thanks to her stand-up roots: "It gave me the ability to fail and embarrass myself, which is important, and something I had to do a lot of in this movie."

The stakes shifted somewhat when it came to her next big-screen adventure, however, as this summer she'll appear in *Thunderbolts** as the assistant of Julia Louis-Dreyfus' power-hungry CIA director, Valentina Allegra de Fontaine. "The scale of that was ridiculous and terrifying in a new way," explains Viswanathan. "It was like, 'Oh, there are 500 extras and a helicopter in this scene, so I'd better not fuck up my line.'"

The helicopters she could sort of get used to, but it took her some time to get her head around sharing scenes with Louis-Dreyfus. "She is the actual queen. I call her the most perfect person in America," she confirms. "It was insane to work with her and then be watching puppy videos together."

When we speak, Viswanathan has moved on from cute clips of canines to a *30 Rock* rewatch, as she may be about to work with the creator of that show and her other foundational text, *Mean Girls*. "I'm potentially doing something with Tina Fey," she teases. "I don't think I can say anything, because it feels like early days; but if it comes through, it will be very, very exciting."

There seems to be no shortage of exciting things happening for Viswanathan. And if she carries on at this rate, she's going to run out of favourite actors to work with pretty soon. "I'd like to do something with Richard Ayoade," she says. "That would genuinely blow my mind." Mr Ayoade, clear your schedule. You're powerless to resist Geraldine Viswanathan in her quest to work with everyone she's ever loved.

***YOU'RE CORDIALLY INVITED* IS ON PRIME VIDEO FROM 30 JANUARY**

Stylist: Mar Eram at A-Frame Agency. Hair: Ricky Fraser at The Wall Group. Make-up: Kirin Bhatty at A-Frame Agency using Armani. Main image: Shirt dress: Balenciaga; Socks: Wolford; Shoes: Ferrari; Jewellery: Stylist's own. Inset: Pink dress: Magda Butrym; Shoes: The Attico; Jewellery: Stylist's own. Additional imagery: Alamy, Getty Images, Imago

BATTLE OF THE SAFDIES

WITH THEIR FIRST SOLO DIRECTORIAL VENTURES INCOMING, A BROTHERLY SHOWDOWN AWAITS. WHO WILL EMERGE TRIUMPHANT?

STAR POWER

THE SMASHING MACHINE

Dwayne Johnson will play former wrestler and MMA fighter Mark Kerr in Benny Safdie's biopic, reuniting with *Jungle Cruise* co-star Emily Blunt as his onscreen wife. The supporting cast may not sound familiar but are a who's who of A-listers in the ring (Oleksandr Usyk, Bas Rutten, Ryan Bader).

MARTY SUPREME

Timothée Chalamet leads Josh Safdie's sports movie, inspired by table-tennis player Marty Reisman. An eclectic supporting ensemble includes Fran Drescher, Tyler, The Creator and Abel Ferrara, plus Gwyneth Paltrow, playing a romantic presence in Marty's life for her first non-Marvel movie role in a decade.

SCALE

THE SMASHING MACHINE

Both films are reported to be A24's joint most-expensive productions to date, with budgets of $70 million apiece. Of course, this is small fry for Johnson — *Red One* was reportedly made for five times that amount — but this film should hopefully have fewer CG snowmen and more impressive punch-ups

MARTY SUPREME

If you're wondering how a '50s-set table-tennis film could earn such a price tag, rumour has it that the story — co-written by Safdie — is a *Catch Me If You Can*-style globetrotting caper rather than a traditional biopic. As Reisman won more than 20 international and national titles during his career, it could check out.

OSCAR ODDS

THE SMASHING MACHINE

The Academy loves a big star venturing into grittier territory, which Johnson will do as he navigates Kerr's struggle with addiction over his career. "I want to push myself in ways that I've not pushed myself in the past," the actor said of taking on the role. That effort could land him his first-ever nomination.

MARTY SUPREME

The Oscars also favour a comeback, which possibly puts Paltrow in the running. Then there's Chalamet, but voters may be more enticed by his years-in-the-making performance in *A Complete Unknown*. Suffice to say, both Safdies could be walking the red carpet at this rate.

RESULT: A TIE! UNCUT GEMS FOR EVERYONE!

On A Role

JOHN MAGARO AS GEOFFREY MASON

THE ACTOR PLAYS A TV PRODUCER FACING A CRISIS IN MUNICH OLYMPICS DRAMA *SEPTEMBER 5*

WORDS **IAN FREER**

THE EARLY ROLE

Aged 22, John Magaro was a background artist in Steven Spielberg's *Munich*, a film depicting the aftermath of the 1972 Olympic hostage crisis. "My big break was a scene where Eric Bana crosses the street and I walk past him," he laughs. "I was very thin, young and hopeful." This first experience on a movie set would stay with Magaro as he went on to play Geoffrey Mason, a TV producer in the ABC sports crew forced into covering the same unfolding tragedy. "It's a very different movie," he notes of the upcoming film *September 5*. "This is much more in the vein of *All The President's Men* and *Spotlight*. The intrigue of the first two minutes of *Munich* is turned into this 90-minute story about how journalism was forever changed on that day."

Top to bottom: John Magaro as Geoffrey Mason in *September 5*; The real Mason in 1988 (left); Magaro had to deal with '70s tech; Tense times for the production team.

THE RESEARCH

Immediately after being cast, Magaro conducted a series of chats with the real Geoffrey Mason. "He made it very clear there was no time to think about emotions or danger or the consequences," he says. "It really gave me a clear picture of how I wanted to approach this: just be unromantic, very truthful, very authentic." Mason also proved invaluable to Magaro by getting the actor into a working TV control room at *CBS Sunday Football*. "What struck me right away was how quiet it was," he says. "It's like a pilot operating an aircraft." Magaro's experiences subsequently informed the screenplay — as did the next development...

THE ARCHIVE

The dramatisation of 'calling the show' — guiding the cameras, selecting the shots, adding in graphics — got a further dose of reality when the production got permission to use the archive footage of ABC anchor Jim McKay, who was a constant during the 22-hour coverage. The inclusion made Magaro up his game. "You just see a man going through it in real time," he levels. "You have to rise to that challenge, and, in a way, not be an actor any more and just be a human. You can't have a false note because they don't have a false note." Sometimes great scene partners don't need to be present.

THE TECH

Just before shooting, Magaro also had to get to grips with cumbersome '70s TV tech. The actor had two weeks to learn how to thread videotape, sport a chunky headset and wield a walkie talkie as if "they were part of me. I couldn't be fumbling or futzing. It's hard to think how this was ever considered state-of-the-art — it's so bulky and inconvenient — but it's fun to step back into that." Mason also wears two analogue watches: one on Munich time, one on New York time. In a job where every second counts, this was a man who didn't want to take any chances.

***SEPTEMBER 5* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 6 FEBRUARY**

Getty Images

THE RECORD-BREAKING ACTOR TAKING BIG SWINGS

MART SANDER ON PLAYING 48 CHARACTERS IN HIS ANTHOLOGY, *DR. SANDER'S SLEEP CURE*

WE'VE SEEN ACTORS play multiple parts before. Alec Guinness played eight different roles in *Kind Hearts And Coronets*. Eddie Murphy took on seven in *The Nutty Professor*. But all pale in comparison to Mart Sander, an Estonian filmmaker who embodies a whopping 48 different parts in his ambitious anthology film, *Dr. Sander's Sleep Cure*. "It was something that had been gnawing on my mind since childhood, together with [winning] an Academy Award and a Nobel Peace Prize," Sander tells *Empire*.

The pieces began to fall into place while he was working on his PhD at Tallinn University in Estonia, which he graduated from in 2024. "Part of my study was to investigate the complicated ways [in which] sound can interact with picture. Can sound narrate a different story for your ears than the story for your eyes?" explains the 57-year-old, who is also a seasoned musician. He made a series of nightmarish short films as part of the project, and after completing his thesis stitched them together with some of his other work and made an anthology film about a man having a fitful night's sleep. "It's a very awful biographic [story]," says Sander, himself an insomniac.

A film-critic friend in America pointed out that the project — which at the time saw Sander play 15 parts including the sleeping man and various roles in the vignettes — would likely qualify for the Guinness World Record for most roles played by an actor. Until they discovered Johnson George, an Indian actor who held the title for playing 45 characters in 2018 fantasy film *Aaranu Njan*.

Yet, undeterred, Sander got to work on a final segment of his film; one that required him to play 33 additional roles. As many of the characters only have a few seconds of screentime, he shot their scenes over a single day. "We filmed it at my place. So I needed to use all the wardrobe I had; it transpired that I do not have as many clothes as I thought I had," Sander laughs.

Now that's what we call a role model: filmmaker Mart Sander as some of the 48 characters he portrays in his upcoming anthology movie.

The filmmaker is as thrilled by the reception to *Sleep Cure* as he is scoring the World Record, having seen it scoop the Audience Award at the Nevermore Film Festival in America. "We went there practically with the whole cast. It was fun," Sander enthuses. He thinks it's unlikely that he'll break another World Record, but is well into his next project: *Tonight, Live*, a pilot for a classic radio-style anthology series set at the BBC. "I'm very much into doing things *now*," Sander explains. "I have the concept trailer, and I'm halfway through this script, and I really want to film it in January. I can't wait." It seems that you don't need a prize to be the busiest filmmaker in Estonia. **BETH WEBB**

***DR. SANDER'S SLEEP CURE* DOES NOT YET HAVE A UK RELEASE DATE**

THE REIGN OF ROTTA

JABBA THE HUTT'S SPAWN IS HAVING A BIG-SCREEN RENAISSANCE. BUT WHAT'S HIS DEAL?

STAR WARS: THE CLONE WARS

2008

Dave Filoni's animated movie introduced Rotta as a "punky muffin" (his translated nickname) pawn in the battle between The Republic and Separatists in a kidnapping storyline inspired by 1989 *samurai* movie *Shogun's Shadow*. The apple of Jabba's eye, the green nubbin was voiced by David Acord, known for Grogu's adorable gurgles.

STAR WARS: THE CLONE WARS — 'SPHERE OF INFLUENCE'

2010

The *Clone Wars* series reintroduced Rotta as a cameo in Season 3. Whereas he only brought cuteness to the story, his presence was a reminder that he still has a stake in the Hutt empire. Questions were raised as to why he didn't feature in a Hutt-centric episode of *The Book Of Boba Fett*. It seems Rotta was just waiting for the spotlight.

THE MANDALORIAN & GROGU

2026

Trading Chicago for Tatooine, *The Bear*'s Jeremy Allen White will reportedly voice the punky muffin in the recently wrapped movie. Nothing is known of Rotta's situation, but given that his past iteration spoke in baby noises, it will certainly be intriguing to see what Filoni and Jon Favreu have in store for JAW. "Goo-goo-gah-gah!" (Translation: "Yes, chef!") **BETH WEBB**

What does Trump's return mean for cinema?

EMPIRE INVESTIGATES HOW THE PRESIDENT-ELECT COULD IMPACT THE FUTURE OF FILMMAKING DURING HIS SECOND TERM

WORDS **KEVIN EG PERRY**

WE ALL KNOW Hollywood loves a sequel, but the imminent arrival of 'Donald Trump: Electric Boogaloo' has been met with a widespread sense of foreboding. In the run-up to November's election, Harrison Ford, Julia Roberts and a whole raft of stars closed ranks behind Trump's rival Kamala Harris, but their efforts were to no avail. Instead, the former President will return to the White House emboldened and quite possibly lugging an axe to grind. "Few people expect a Trump administration to be pro-Hollywood," AGC Studios (*Hit Man*, *Woman Of The Hour*) head Stuart Ford tells *Empire*. "So we're strapping ourselves in for likely more turbulence."

Ford fears that could spell trouble for films with politically or socially contentious subject matter. He was one of the producers of Justin Kurzel's thriller *The Order*, which stars Jude Law as an FBI agent fighting white supremacists in '80s Idaho, and says it wasn't an easy sell in the current climate: "As we saw in the run up to the election, the media conglomerates that control studios and streamers are likely to play it ever more safe when it comes to creative decision-making."

That problem will only be exacerbated if, as many have predicted, the number of different studios and streamers available continues to shrink. One of the few people in Hollywood to welcome Trump's return has been Warner Bros. Discovery CEO David Zaslav. In a November earnings call, he said it would be a "real positive" if the new administration opens the door for further mergers between already hulking entertainment conglomerates. "Further media consolidation looks inevitable," says Ford, "which is never good for innovation or variety." Expect yet more franchises and sequels — and perhaps more unexpected crossovers. 'The Lego Mission: Impossible Movie', anyone?

Trump's imminent return already seems to have had a chilling effect on what actors are willing to speak out about. *The Apprentice* star Sebastian Stan recently lamented he was unable to take part in *Variety*'s *Actors On Actors* series because the publication couldn't find an actor to pair him with. For Ruth Treacy, one of the producers of Ali Abbasi's Trump origin story, that's a troubling sign. "I'm concerned there may be a culture of conservatism in the films released in the next four years in the US," she says. "However, I also hope the press *The Apprentice* received in relation to Stan being unable to find a partner for *Actors On Actors* has demonstrated to audiences and filmmakers that there is a strong undercurrent of self-imposed censorship at play in Hollywood. This is something everyone needs to resist where they can."

Perhaps the industry's nervous silence should not be surprising: they know better than anyone that sequels tend to be worse than the original.

Top to bottom: The President-Elect; Jude Law in *The Order*; Sebastian Stan as Donald Trump (right) in *The Apprentice*; Harrison Ford endorses Kamala Harris.

Getty Images

THE MONTHLY MIXTAPE

EMPIRE MIXMASTER AMON WARMANN SELECTS THIS MONTH'S ESSENTIAL TUNES

'O MIO BABBINO CARO'
MARIA CALLAS

MARIA

Gianni Schicchi's famous opera aria is given added beauty by the iconic performer, who proves that there's no note she can't reach.

'LIKE A ROLLING STONE'
TIMOTHÉE CHALAMET

A COMPLETE UNKNOWN

The actor trained for years in order to nail Bob Dylan's enduring, singular vocals, which were recorded live for the film. The results of his take on this formative classic are spectacular.

'MILELE'
ANIKA NONI ROSE AND KEITH DAVID

MUFASA: THE LION KING

Lin-Manuel Miranda penned this soothing ballad, which Mufasa's parents sing with soul and hope about the land that will become Pride Rock.

'STARE'
ALEX SOMERS

NICKEL BOYS

Distorted vocals struggling to break through a wall of sound suddenly switch to a clear, angelic crescendo in this accompaniment to RaMell Ross' unconventional drama.

'WOLVES'
CRISTOBAL TAPIA DE VEER

BABYGIRL

De Veer ingeniously uses the dialogue track and sounds made by the characters throughout this erotic drama to enhance his score, culminating in this breathy delight.

LISTEN NOW! HEAD TO THE *EMPIRE* SPOTIFY ACCOUNT TO HEAR ALL OF THE ABOVE

FROM HARD-HITTING DOCS TO JAZZ HANDS

JOSHUA OPPENHEIMER MAKES HIS FICTION DEBUT WITH MESSAGE-PACKING MUSICAL THE END

A MUSICAL ABOUT a wealthy family ensconced underground after a climate catastrophe they're partly responsible for sure seems like a departure for director Joshua Oppenheimer. Until now, he was best known for *The Act Of Killing*, a harrowing documentary that reenacted the mass killings in '60s Indonesia. In 2016, Oppenheimer received an Oscar nomination for the film's spiritual successor, *The Look Of Silence*.

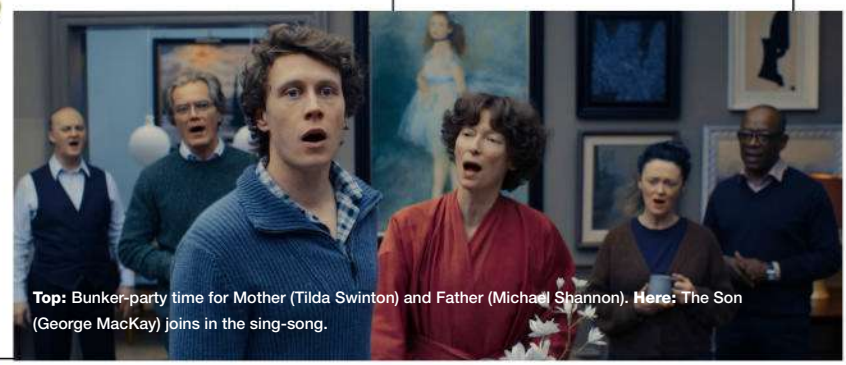
Oppenheimer never intended to make the leap to narrative film, but while conducting research for a documentary in 2016 he visited a bunker that a real oligarch had built for himself and his family. The filmmaker was fascinated by their state of denial. "[This family] was blocking out all of the questions that I found myself dying to ask," he tells *Empire*. "How would they live with any remorse for what they were fleeing? How would they cope with the guilt they might feel about people they didn't bring?"

On the plane home he rewatched Jacques Demy's 1964 musical *The Umbrellas Of Cherbourg*, and the two worlds fused. "Musicals embody a sense of false hope and that uniquely human ability to lie to ourselves," Oppenheimer explains. "In reinventing that form we would be able to explore the awful consequences of that self-deception." *The End* sees Michael Shannon's oil baron hunker down with his wife (Tilda Swinton) and son (George MacKay) in a luxurious bunker within a salt mine. Their utopia, soundtracked by 1950s-style songs that they perform, is disrupted by a stranger from the unseen wastelands above.

Oppenheimer wants the film's urgent message to be heard. "This is what the end would look like if we don't change course now," he warns. "It may be too late for the family in the film, but it's not too late for us." And though he's got no concrete plans yet, he's keen to keep making offbeat, tuneful movies. "I have my heavy metal musical about the colonisation of Greenland. But I don't know that that's gonna happen!" he laughs. As wacky as it sounds, perhaps *The End* is just the beginning.

LAURA VENNING

THE END DOES NOT YET HAVE A UK RELEASE DATE



Top: Bunker-party time for Mother (Tilda Swinton) and Father (Michael Shannon). **Here:** The Son (George MacKay) joins in the sing-song.

The TV show handling the truth

ERIC NEWMAN ON ZERO DAY, HIS ROBERT DE NIRO-FRONTED SERIES ABOUT POWER, POLITICS AND PERCEPTION

WORDS **BETH WEBB**

"I BELIEVE THE world is not so much made up of good guys and bad guys, but bad guys and very bad guys," Eric Newman tells *Empire*. It's an understandable statement from the showrunner of cartel drama *Narcos* and spin-off *Narcos: Mexico*, but for his new series *Zero Day*, a conspiracy theory-plagued political thriller, the boundaries are a little blurrier. "We came up with this story [about] an investigation — the outcome of which really matters — and set it in a world where truth has become relative, and therefore the actual truth is so important," he explains.

The "we" in question is news producer and screenwriter Noah Oppenheim and Pulitzer prize-winning journalist Michael Schmidt, author of *Donald Trump V. The United States: Inside the Struggle To Stop A President*, Newman's fellow showrunners on *Zero Day*. Set largely in the aftermath of a devastating cyber-attack on America, the show follows the government's race to find the culprits, spearheaded by former POTUS George Mullen, played by Robert De Niro in his first major TV role. "Every once in a while I do have those moments of like, 'Oh my God, that's Robert De Niro,'" laughs Newman, who pitched the concept to the star over dinner. "He took to it immediately."

Adding to the show's already high stakes is Mullen's private battle with Alzheimer's, which makes his relationship with the truth even more problematic. "It's about someone who, in a world where people are losing their way, is forced to investigate something while he himself is losing his way," Newman summarises. With the clock ticking, Mullen delves into the ever-evolving world of cyber-terrorism while media-fuelled conspiracy theories bring more trouble to his door. "I am fascinated by why people are willing to go down these rabbit holes and truly believe everything from, 'We didn't go to the moon' to Pizzagate," says Newman. "Certainly in the last four years, maybe even eight years, I've become less judgemental and disdainful [about] what people believe. I believe there's a reason — sometimes outside of their control — that people are willing to believe certain ridiculous (in my mind) ideas."

Zero Day is careful to sidestep any political affiliations; there's no mention of Republicans or Democrats, even when it comes to Mullen and the active President, played by Angela Bassett. But it's impossible not to contextualise the show's themes during an especially heated and reactive time in America. "My hope is that under it all there is an aspirational quality [and that the] people tasked with protecting us and defending us and governing us find their way to the truth," Newman muses. Perhaps some of those guys have the power to not be so bad, after all.

Top to bottom: Former POTUS George Mullen (Robert De Niro) faces the media; President Mitchell (Angela Bassett); Mullen's former aide Roger Carlson (Jesse Plemons) chats to Robert Morris (Clark Gregg); Mullen, mulling.

"LISTENING TO MYSELF IS THE HEART OF THIS FILM"

WALTER SALLES WRITES FOR *EMPIRE* ABOUT THE JOURNEY THAT LED TO I'M STILL HERE, BRAZIL'S ACADEMY AWARDS SUBMISSION

Top to bottom: Mother Eunice Paiva (Fernanda Torres); Eunice with her husband Rubens (Selton Mello) and two of her children; Director Walter Salles on set.

THERE ARE SOME memories you can't wash away. They echo within. I've been living with the images and sounds of the interior of a house since the early '70s. These glimpses of memory are luminous. The windows are constantly open, no lock on the door. In it my friends mingle, there are so many of them. Music is everywhere. I'm 13 and my country, Brazil, is under military dictatorship. The joy that pulsates in this house is a form of resistance in a time of gloom.

Then, there are other images I can't evade — I wish I could. The house is now shut down. Military police circle it. No-one is allowed to trespass security lines. These images define a before and an after in my life.

Duke Ellington was once asked what one had to do to become a musician. "First, listen to other musicians all the time. Then, listen to yourself," was his answer, adding: "When you cease to listen to other musicians or to yourself, you're no longer in music."

Listening to myself is at the heart of *I'm Still Here*. The film is based on the memoir written by Marcelo Paiva about his parents, Rubens and Eunice Paiva, and how his family had to reinvent itself after tragedy knocked on their door. And it's based on the glimpses of memory from my youth.

I'm Still Here focuses on a unique character: Eunice Paiva. As a mother of five, she must find new forms of resilience and resistance to move on. She doesn't bend to a violent regime. Never cries in public, or in front of her children. To smile becomes a subversive act for her. Her gesture is passed on from generation to generation.

To collaborate with Fernanda Torres and Fernanda Montenegro to recreate Eunice at different stages of her life was fundamental. It was clear that we had to move away from melodrama to bring justice to Eunice. Restraint and subtraction were key, and these incomparable actresses were my co-authors in this search.

A friend who watched *I'm Still Here* said that the house was reopened thanks to cinema. As we now travel with the film, I have the impression that every single viewer is reopening it in their own way. In Brazil, different generations are filling theatres to spend time with the family I once knew. This is the miracle of cinema: a film is dreamt collectively to be shared collectively, as new memories are formed.

***I'M STILL HERE* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 21 FEBRUARY**

ON OUR MINDS

DAFT MUSINGS FROM THE WARPED MINDS OF TEAM *EMPIRE*

BILL McCONKEY

BETH WEBB IS THINKING ABOUT... ROBERT PATTINSON'S PUBLICITY FIBS

"Topping my excitement for *Mickey 17*'s release is a new R-Patz truth-bending press tour. The actor has formerly claimed that he witnessed a clown dying in an explosion and was a women's hand model. Bring on the bonkers faux anecdotes."

WHITNEY JONES IS THINKING ABOUT... NETFLIX BEING HORNY ON MAIN

"The last few times Mum and I have been on Netflix, we've seen a rise in steamy movies targeting a female audience. It feels like they're trying to bring sexy back but in a strange Hallmark way. Like going to church and fancying the priest."

NICK DE SEMLYEN IS THINKING ABOUT... CHRISTOPHER WALKEN AND GOOGLY EYES

"In a classic *SNL* skit, Walken is a gardener who puts googly eyes on plants so he can trust them. It's gloriously weird, featuring Walken saying things like, 'Never turn your back on a cactus.' Did I put googly eyes on my Christmas tree? Naturally!"

Marco Vittur

Finding love in a hopeless place

SCOTT DERRICKSON ON MAKING THE GORGE, A VALENTINE'S DAY MOVIE LIKE NO OTHER

WORDS **BETH WEBB**

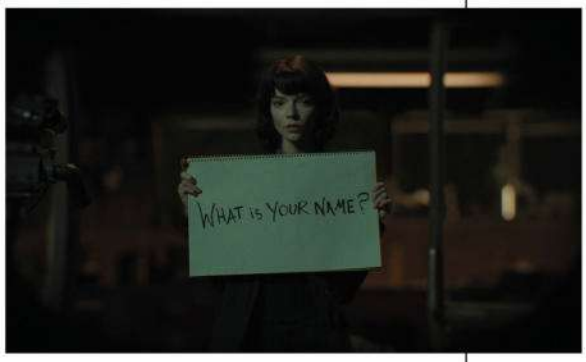
IT'S SAFE TO say that *The Gorge* is the most romantic film that Scott Derrickson has made to date. Sure, it's not the most conventional love story; for starters, there's a mysterious, evil-dwelling void across which hired operatives Drasa (Anya Taylor-Joy) and Levi (Miles Teller) flutter their eyelashes at each other while trying to keep the world safe. But for the director behind *Doctor Strange* and horrors *The Black Phone*, *Sinister* and *Deliver Us From Evil*, it might as well be *When Harry Met Sally*. He tells *Empire* about conjuring up a crush from across a canyon.

THE MEET CUTE

"When it comes to romantic movies, I'm a sucker for the old American classics. I love *The Philadelphia Story*, I love *Casablanca*," says Derrickson. His last film, 2021's *The Black Phone*, saw a masked killer prey upon neighbourhood boys; part of the reason for his pivot from pure horror was that Zach Dean's script for *The Gorge* — about two snipers who fall for each other while guarding a ravine before being forced to face its inhabitants — reached him while he was smitten. "I can't make a movie if I don't have a personal connection to the material at that given time of my life," he explains. "I [had] just gotten remarried and had gone through the experience of falling in love. It was the right time to tell us a story like this."

THE HONEYMOON PHASE

What starts as a flirtatious firing of bullets evolves into a long-distance courtship between the pair, which sees them play chess via binoculars and assemble makeshift drum sets in their respective towers when they're not patrolling for baddies. Despite the actors having starred in projects about chess (*The Queen's Gambit*) and drumming (*Whiplash*), Derrickson swears those scenes were coincidental, although he couldn't resist adding a dance sequence scored by the Yeah Yeah Yeahs that wasn't in the script. "They're both good dancers," says the director of Taylor-Joy and Teller, adding: "I felt like there needed to be a culmination of the romance when they physically come together, and I didn't want that to just be a sex scene."



THE REAL DEAL

Both co-stars fit the bill when it came to playing skilled markspeople. "Snipers are young; it's a young person's game," Derrickson explains. In Taylor-Joy he saw the patience and physicality required. "Miles — I buy him as a soldier," he adds. "He has a lot of military friends and family members." This may not seem like the stuff of romantic fireworks, but it was key to Drasa and Levi's burgeoning relationship, especially when pitted against the gorge. "How they look out for each other, how they cover each other, how they move together as a unit — that's their training, but it's also their commitment to the other person," Derrickson explains. "I really love the way that they are always watching out for [each other's] safety."

THE NEXT CHAPTER

After making *The Gorge*, Derrickson is keen to make more romantic films alongside his decidedly scarier fare. "I think the most powerful emotions are the feeling of falling in love and the feeling of real fear," he summarises. "My gravitation towards horror comes from having experienced a lot of fear in my childhood, that I'm always dealing with as an adult. And at this stage of my life, feelings of love have [also] become of great interest to me." It may not quite be the stuff of Nora Ephron, but a love story with a body count will certainly never be boring.

***THE GORGE* IS ON APPLE TV+ FROM 14 FEBRUARY**

Clockwise from main: Hired operatives Drasa (Anya Taylor-Joy) and Levi (Miles Teller); The pair get close; Things turn a bit *Love Actually* — no hope or agenda; Levi reminds Drasa of the rules; Taylor-Joy with director Scott Derrickson on set.

Niko Tavernise/Warner Bros., Marco Vittur

THE PLATFORM

"The monsters are here. And not a moment too soon"

ALEX GODFREY ON THE STRANGE COMFORT OF BIG-SCREEN BEASTS IN THESE TRYING TIMES

I HAD THE most vivid dream the other night. I was in a restaurant, watching through a huge window as a distant tornado careened closer and closer, finally crashing through the glass. I crawled under a steel table for shelter and grabbed one of its legs as the tornado swooped in... and there I was, still and safe, in the eye of the storm.

I am an anxious person, and these are anxious times: global pandemics, global warming, (potential) global nuclear war. But it's okay, because the monsters are coming. And not just any monsters: the *classic* monsters. This year, we've already had Robert Eggers' *Nosferatu* (basically bootleg *Dracula*) and Leigh Whannell's *Wolf Man*, his spiritual sequel to 2020's *The Invisible Man*; there are *two* Frankenstein films on the way (Guillermo del Toro's, and Maggie Gyllenhaal's *The Bride!*); and in the works, Lee Cronin's *The Mummy* and James Wan's *Creature From The Black Lagoon*.

On the one hand, this is a coincidental confluence. But something's in the water: things out there are undoubtedly Not Great, and cinematic horror is rounding up the O.G.s to chime in. Compared to genuine horrors, the fear we experience in cinemas can be a balm. Escapist anxiety can alleviate real-world concerns; there is comfort in dread. And the monsters help us to feel less alone.

Frankenstein has always been about loneliness. Mary Shelley's mother had died when the author was 11 days old, and shortly before she began writing her novel, her own first child died prematurely. Out came this poor, sad, wandering creature, confused about why he's been created in the first place. In Gyllenhaal's *The Bride!*, Christian Bale's lonely Frankenstein (pictured above), desperate for companionship, will bring a murdered woman back to life. In Eggers' *Nosferatu*, Bill Skarsgård's rotting rotter Count Orlok is obsessed with Lily-Rose Depp's Ellen, regardless of the cost. Whannell's *Wolf Man*, meanwhile, is about the effect someone's deterioration has on their loved ones.

All of the above creatures are in some sort of disarray or disintegration. As is the world, and as are we, getting older, slowly marching towards death. We just want some sort of happiness. The monsters might be out to get us, but also, well, they *get* us. Universal's Dark Universe died on impact with 2017's *The Mummy*, but those old monsters are rallying together of their own accord, to frighten — and assuage — us when we need it the most. They can help us, they can heal us, giving us a shared experience, making us feel less alone, in the eye of the storm. The monsters are *here*. And not a moment too soon.

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How Much Is A Pint Of Milk?

Lucy Liu

THE *PRESENCE* STAR LOVES BREAKFAST, BUT NOT ON A BOAT

WORDS **OLLY RICHARDS**

ARNO

Which movie have you seen more than any other?
A Fish Called Wanda. I always thought it was so funny and different. I don't generally watch films more than once, but I'd say I've seen that about five times.

What's your most irrational fear?
Going on a cruise. I don't like the idea of being in the middle of the ocean and just stuck there. There's a helplessness there that I wouldn't be able to handle. It's the Titanic of it all.

How much is a pint of milk?
I have never bought a pint of milk in my life. Who buys it that small? I'll guess a pint would be about $1.50?

When in your life were you most starstruck?
When I went to a party for the Oscars, I saw Michael Caine there with his wife. I was so tremendously moved that they came up to *me* and he said he was a really big fan of *Ally McBeal*. I was very shocked, because he was someone who was such a huge star when I was growing up in the '70s and '80s, and was also someone who was 'overseas'. It was a huge moment for me.

What do you do better than anyone else you know?
I make a mean breakfast. Before I started acting, one of the jobs I did was breakfast catering for commercial productions, at, like, three o'clock in the morning. So I can whip up an omelette or waffles, no problem. I like breakfast at any time of day. Breakfast for dinner, breakfast for lunch, breakfast for... well, breakfast.

As a child, whose poster did you have on your wall?
C. Thomas Howell. I fell in love with him when he was in *The Outsiders*. I remember going through LA once, driving by one of the downtown clubs. He was going in and all these people were screaming at him. I had such a crush on him. I actually worked with him, much, much later, in *Southland*. I was just blown over. He's a terrific guy. No, I did not tell him about my teenage crush on him, but I guess he could find out now!

What's your go-to comfort watch?
The Great British Bake Off. I also really love the kids' version. I watch that with my son. And oh God, when they're crying... I just can't believe how young they are. I think the judges on the kids' version are phenomenal. They always find the positive in the *blob* that's on the table.

What's the worst job you've ever had?
I think I was still in high school when I had this job at a discount store. I had to sit on a ladder with a megaphone and announce the specials of the day. Like, "BUY TEN WASHCLOTHS FOR A DOLLAR." I was on minimum wage, in Queens, shouting about whatever the store had too much of.

What's the best advice you've ever been given?
"Stay exactly who you are, fired up and ready to go." It was from Helen Mirren. She is a wonderful, magical person. We were just texting each other. Often people will give you advice that doesn't reflect who you are and tell you to act in a different way, like, "Relax and take it easy." Helen said, "No, you are perfect as you are: fired up and ready to go." It really struck me.

What's the worst smell in the world?
Cigarette smoke. I've somehow become almost allergic to it. Any really strong smells — cigarette or cigar smoke, intense perfumes, hairspray — and I start to break out in hives.

When were you last naked outdoors?
Probably when I was in Los Angeles, in my own house, which was very private. I'd just go skinny-dipping in the pool.

If you weren't an actor, what would your dream job be?
Either an artist or a chef. An artist because I already do that, and a chef because I love the idea of being somebody who creates something that everyone can share. Everybody comes together for food. You said "dream job", so we'd really be leaning into the dream part for me to be good enough to be a chef.

***PRESENCE* IS IN CINEMAS ON 24 JANUARY**

reviews

FILMS, TV, BOOKS, GAMES — ALL THE BIG RELEASES, RATED

16 JANUARY - 12 FEBRUARY 2025 | EDITED BY **JOHN NUGENT**

★★★★★ EXCELLENT
★★★★ STRONG
★★★ GOOD
★★ WEAK
★ YIKES

The master builder: Architect László Tóth (Adrien Brody) is in his element.

Top to bottom: Cousins in arms: Tóth and Attila (Alessandro Nivola); Industrialist Harrison Lee Van Buren Sr (Guy Pearce) has a dream; The project takes shape.

WATCH FIRST

Brady Corbet has cited the similarly epic *Once Upon A Time In America* (1984) and *1900* (1976) as touchpoints in creating a film on a giant canvas.

FILM

THE BRUTALIST

A NEW AMERICAN EPIC, ETCHED IN CONCRETE

★★★★★

OUT **24 JANUARY** / CERT **18** / **215 MINS**

DIRECTOR Brady Corbet
CAST Adrien Brody, Guy Pearce, Felicity Jones, Alessandro Nivola, Joe Alwyn, Raffey Cassidy, Emma Laird

PLOT In the aftermath of World War II, Hungarian-Jewish architect László Tóth (Brody) travels to the US and pursues the American Dream under the patronage of Harrison Lee Van Buren Sr (Pearce).

CITIZEN KANE. The Godfather. Once Upon A Time In America. There Will Be Blood. Towering monuments of moviemaking, all — and all namechecked in notices when Brady Corbet's third picture, *The Brutalist*, won the Silver Lion for Best Direction at the Venice Film Festival. Is it possible for any modern movie, even an American epic of these proportions (and we don't just mean the 215-minute running time), to stand firm in the shadows of such superstructures?

The Brutalist gives it a damn good go. An austere, novelistic, self-consciously important film that unfurls in a measured sprawl, it nonetheless exerts an iron grip. Yes, it's shot in luxurious VistaVision and divided into chapters and features a 15-minute intermission. And sure, it mulls on the weighty themes of Jewish identity, immigration, privilege, culture-versus-commerce and the thin lines between inspiration and insanity, ambition and crushing egotism. But homework it ain't. Just as Dostoevsky's doorstop novels bristle with brio, Corbet's myth-making saga propels as it soars.

It begins in 1947, as Hungarian-born Jewish architect László Tóth (Adrien Brody) spills from the bowels of a teeming ship to eye Ellis Island's famous statue. From Tóth's angle, Lady Liberty appears upside down, and America, land of dreams, will prove a frequently topsy-turvy, nauseating experience for Tóth over the next 30 years.

Finding home in Pennsylvania with his Americanised cousin Attila (Alessandro Nivola) and his Catholic wife Audrey (Emma Laird), László builds items for their furniture shop and is then commissioned by the wealthy Harry Van Buren (Joe Alwyn) to turn a fusty reading room into a modernist library. It's to be a surprise for Harry's industrialist father, Harrison Lee Van Buren Sr (Guy Pearce), but the blue-blooded patriarch sees red and ejects Tóth without payment. Until, that is, his airy new chamber features in *Look* magazine, and Van Buren Sr hires Tóth to design a vast building in honour of his late mother.

Like Corbet's provocative first two films, *The Childhood Of A Leader* and *Vox Lux* — about, respectively, a fascist dictator and a pop star — *The Brutalist* charts the rise of an enigmatic figure. At first we know little about Holocaust survivor Tóth, except that he awaits the arrival of his wife, Erzsébet (an excellent Felicity Jones), and his niece, Zsófia (Raffey Cassidy), who remain in Europe after the war. But slowly, brick by brick, the pieces are dropped into place, and we learn that Tóth is a celebrated architect of the Bauhaus school. At once ugly and beautiful, the jutting, concrete blocks of his Brutalist structures seek to shape a utilitarian future. They're mirrored in the strange geometry of Tóth's face — he now nurses a heroin habit having used to douse the pain of a broken nose en route to America.

Brody's Tóth brims with pain and passion, the actor pushing beyond his Oscar-winning performance in Roman Polanski's Holocaust drama *The Pianist*. In silence he speaks volumes, with Tóth a halting, traumatised figure in the first half of the picture. In contrast, yet serving to complement, Daniel Blumberg's tumultuous, soul-shaking score erupts from the ninth circle of hell. Post-intermission, Tóth's words escalate and his emotions amplify, uncorked by the arrival of Erzsébet and Zsófia. There's also the construction of a prodigious building that will serve as auditorium, chapel, library and gymnasium, and the clashes with domineering Van Buren that come with it.

Pearce, imposing and sonorous, is the film's stealth MVP. Unnerving even when he's being charming, Van Buren Sr creates a strange push-pull to his relationship with Tóth, currents of admiration and envy, power and disgust swirling beneath the surface. Corbet, perhaps, sees echoes of his own experience — the visionary artist beholden to the whims of myopic moneymen — and then pours cultural prejudice into the mix. In one shocking scene, the intangibles of the Tóth-Van Buren Sr union are made tangible, unnecessarily so. But so grand is this edifice, it barely wobbles.

That such an epic was constructed for under $10 million beggars belief. Here is an allegorical foundation myth that towers above Coppola's similarly themed *Megalopolis*, and that shuffles complicated relationship dynamics with awe-inspiring visuals. Tóth and Van Buren Sr's visit to the marble mines of Carrara is spectacle as spiritual experience, and throughout, cinematographer Lol Crawley's ascetic images speak to Tóth's commanding creations. Immense.

JAMIE GRAHAM

VERDICT **Brady Corbet's seismic drama reaches for the sky as it surveys the soul of a man and a nation. There will be Oscars.**

Clockwise from main: Time after time: Richard (Tom Hanks) and Margaret (Robin Wright) experience the spring, summer and autumn of their years.

FILM

HERE

ROBERT ZEMECKIS GOES BACK TO THE PAST

★★

OUT **17 JANUARY** / CERT **12A** / **104 MINS**

DIRECTOR Robert Zemeckis
CAST Tom Hanks, Robin Wright, Paul Bettany, Kelly Reilly, Michelle Dockery, Gwilym Lee, Nikki Amuka-Bird

PLOT In one house, generations of people experience joy, tragedy and hope, spanning hundreds of years of American history.

FROM THE EXTRAORDINARY artistry of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* to the dead-eyed children of *The Polar Express*, there is perhaps no greater champion for paradigm-shifting visual effects than Robert Zemeckis. With *Here*, Zemeckis pushes the envelope again, telling the non-linear story of different generations inhabiting the same house over hundreds of years, all from the same static view of its living room. But although the unconvincing de-ageing of Tom Hanks and Robin Wright back to their *Forrest Gump* days has grabbed headlines, it's the least of the film's problems.

Here certainly begins boldly, with a herd of dinosaurs thundering past the camera through bubbling, primordial mud, only to be obliterated by that pesky asteroid. Focusing on that same patch of land, Zemeckis then rattles through a few million years, leaping forward to its inhabitance by Native Americans, a quick cameo by Benjamin Franklin, and the construction of a small town. The house itself is built around 1900, and the main narrative thrust is the family saga of baby boomer Richard (Hanks) and his wife Margaret (Wright) facing the hollow promise of the American Dream.

The film is conceptually based on a 2014 graphic novel by Richard McGuire. Zemeckis utilises the same visual conceit of stationary images from multiple timelines laid over each other, creating a collage-like effect. On the page it's striking, but in its translation to screen it acquires an ugly, weightless CGI sheen. The cast are forced to stand in the same spot close to the camera to deliver their most dramatic lines, as if downstage in a play.

As uncinematic as this feels, the primary issue is the script; the dialogue is so thuddingly obvious as to prompt unintentional laughter. Michelle Dockery as the house's 1900-era occupant gets lumbered with the worst of the expository clunkers, like, "You mortgaged our home to buy that ridiculous airplane!" Zemeckis also has his characters constantly yammering at each other, unable to let impactful moments breathe.

Beneath the plasticky lacquer and typical Zemeckian sentimentality is a harsh truth about suburban suffocation and the emotional damage we inherit from and inflict upon our families. But it's hard to move beyond the shock of the uncannily plumped-up faces of young Hanks and Wright, and they're both more at home in the later scenes once the ageing couple starts confronting their mutual lack of fulfilment. Both are able to give some much-needed poignancy to the final act, especially a quietly yearning Wright, even as *Here* remains trapped in its own stilted melodrama. **LAURA VENNING**

VERDICT **Another deeply flawed, tech-forward endeavour for Zemeckis in which glimmers of human emotion only occasionally break through. Like *Cloud Atlas* for baby boomers experiencing late-middle-age malaise.**

FILM

UNSTOPPABLE

★★★

OUT **NOW (PRIME VIDEO)** / CERT **12A** / **123 MINS**
DIRECTOR William Goldenberg
CAST Jharrel Jerome, Jennifer Lopez, Bobby Cannavale, Don Cheadle

No sports-movie cliché goes unturned in this true underdog rags-to-riches story of one man's triumph against adversity. Anthony Robles (Jharrel Jerome), born with one leg, rises up the ranks of his high-school wrestling team to compete at the highest levels; his mother, Judy (Jennifer Lopez), vows to support him even when facing poverty and an abusive husband. Jerome plays Robles with commitment and conviction, while Lopez does her best work since 2019's *Hustlers*. Adapted from Robles' book, it was unlikely to be anything less than feel-good hagiography. But there is a place for sports movies that have earnest intentions and powerful performances, and *Unstoppable* possesses both in spades. **JN**

FILM

SEPTEMBER 5

★★★★

OUT **7 FEBRUARY** / CERT **15** / **95 MINS**
DIRECTOR Tim Fehlbaum
CAST Peter Sarsgaard, John Magaro, Ben Chaplin, Leonie Benesch

Tim Fehlbaum's lean, tense recreation of the 1972 Munich Olympic hostage crisis pays homage to the ABC sports crew yanked into covering the unfurling horror on the ground. Keeping the crisis itself eerily distant, the film is mostly rooted in the small TV studio, with developments playing out on monitors overseen by John Magaro and Peter Sarsgaard's producers and their team. The actors are the strongest asset here, as Fehlbaum focuses on the journalism over the act itself and its bigger, broader political context. More of the latter might have made *September 5* a richer film, but as an erudite and well-performed study of TV reporting in an analogue age, this is an exciting, Sorkin-esque ode. **BW**

The *Dungeons & Dragons*-inspired 'The Queen's Cradle'. **Below:** A new take on Mega Man.

TV

SECRET LEVEL

THE VIDEO-GAME ANTHOLOGY MADE UP ENTIRELY OF NPCs

★★★

OUT **NOW (PRIME VIDEO)** / EPISODES VIEWED **8 OF 15**

SHOWRUNNERS Tim Miller, Dave Wilson
CAST Arnold Schwarzenegger, Keanu Reeves, Patrick Schwarzenegger, Kevin Hart, Laura Bailey, Gabriel Luna, Ariana Greenblatt

PLOT A collection of video-game-inspired stories. A band of adventurers battle dragon cults (*Dungeons & Dragons*); a group of robots fights for survival (*Unreal Tournament*); a mysterious entity is trapped in a maze (*Pac-Man*).

ANIMATED ANTHOLOGY SHOWS are all the rage. Marvel's *What If...?*, *Star Wars: Visions* and *Love Death + Robots* have demonstrated the exciting creative opportunities for unique character-driven storytelling paired with boundary-pushing animation and art styles, while allowing different studios to play in the sandboxes of established franchises. *Secret Level*, from Tim Miller — one of the brains behind *Love Death + Robots* — is a worthy new example, with each short but kaleidoscopic (if occasionally patchy) instalment bringing a different gaming universe to life.

Comprising 15 star-studded standalone episodes, the series pulls off no mean feat: bringing together more game brands in a single outing than has ever been attempted before. Ranging from beloved tabletop classics (*Dungeons & Dragons*, *Warhammer 40,000*) to more recent blockbuster console juggernauts (*God Of War*, *Ghost Of Tsushima*), the gorgeously animated shorts showcase a kaleidoscopic mix of genres, characters and styles.

The *Warhammer* instalment, 'And They Shall Know No Fear', is an unapologetically bloody opener, offering a gripping, action-packed non-linear narrative; while *The Unreal Tournament* episode 'Xan', set inside a *Tron*-esque tournament, ponders sentient robot uprisings. Elsewhere, *Dungeons & Dragons* fans will be heartened at the lavish CG-animated short 'The Queen's Cradle', which perfectly captures the vibe of an old-school role-playing campaign. They're not all certified bangers though: *CrossFire* episode 'Good Conflict' resembles an extended cut scene from a generic first-person-shooter. The divisive *Pac-Man*-inspired 'Circle', meanwhile, is the weirdest, most out-there offering; your mileage may vary.

While, admittedly, there may be limited appeal here for non-gamers — this is very much a series "for the fans" — the main issue with the series is that each episode genuinely leaves you wanting more: mere morsels, rather than a full meal. *Secret Level* could certainly provide a springboard for more expansive standalone shows, especially with the starry talent attached. Keanu Reeves and Arnold Schwarzenegger are among the voice actors.

Its biggest strength, however, lies not in its A-list voice actors or AAA-game IP, but in its animation. *Secret Level* has some of the most beautifully rendered animation you'll see this year, with each episode taking on a different style. From photoreal motion-capture to 3D animation. Tim Miller and his Blur Studio have crafted a truly immersive experience, a video-game 'cinematic' in anthology form. Level up. **NICOLA AUSTIN**

VERDICT **Though it may mainly only appeal to gamers, this largely solid anthology is still a handsomely animated video-game adaptation — opening up intriguing new storytelling opportunities.**

Do not adjust your set: the anarchic *Saturday Night* is unleashed live on US TV.

FILM

SATURDAY NIGHT

LIVE FROM NEW YORK, IT'S...

★★★

OUT **31 JANUARY** / CERT **15** / **109 MINS**

DIRECTOR Jason Reitman
CAST Gabriel LaBelle, Rachel Sennott, Cory Michael Smith, Cooper Hoffman, Nicholas Braun, Matt Wood, J.K. Simmons

PLOT On 11 October 1975, in Midtown Manhattan, a group of people are preparing to put on a show. The content may be silly, but the stakes are higher than the famous 66-storey building they're in.

SATURDAY NIGHT WOULD make for a very solid double-bill with a Muppets movie. And not just because there are Muppets in it — well, primitive Muppets, at least, in the form of early Jim Henson creations King Ploobis and Vazh. Because much like one of Kermit and co's capers, it's all about putting on a show, and how much stress, anxiety and arm-flapping goes into playing music and lighting lights. At the centre of Jason Reitman's movie, essentially playing the role of the frog, is the cardigan-wearing Lorne Michaels (Gabriel LaBelle), young Canadian TV producer and wannabe revolutionary of the medium. He's the sensible one. Around him swirls chaos, in many forms. There's even an Animal stand-in, in the burly shape of John Belushi (Matt Wood), cocaine appreciator and walking tornado.

This is, however, far from family viewing. NBC's sketch-comedy series *Saturday Night Live* (known for its first two seasons as *Saturday Night*) aired at midnight New York time, setting out to be edgy adult entertainment unlike anything else on the box. In their recounting of the story behind the now 50-year-old TV show's first ever episode, perilously filmed live, Reitman leans into the R-rated mayhem. "I would rather butt-fuck cancer than make these changes," says head writer Michael O'Donoghue, a famously acerbic figure in comedy history, superbly captured by Tommy Dewey. Legendary vaudevillian Milton Berle (J.K. Simmons), aka 'Uncle Miltie', shows up and flashes his equally legendary (size-wise) penis. LSD is consumed — specifically, according to Dan Aykroyd (Dylan O'Brien), "a sacred strain from the Isan plateau of Thailand". There is screaming. There is fire. There is blood, 28 gallons of the stuff, albeit fake plasma made for a gag.

It's a lot. And for the most part, it's very entertaining, if stressful: think *Uncut Gems* with comics, or an East Coast *The Player*, the camera perpetually bustling down corridors, capturing snatches of disorder. The freneticism does, though, begin to feel a little one-note. Reitman and co-writer Gil Kenan pile on the anarchy, but given so much of what they show didn't actually happen on 11 October (there was no lighting rig crashing to the ground, no Uncle Miltie, no angry phone call from talk-show titan Johnny Carson), it feels like they could have eased back on the chaos and given more space to the things that actually happened, the people who *were* there.

Some of the players punch through even with their limited screentime: O'Brien is terrific as the data-spewing (and, at the time, unlikely *30 Rock* sex symbol) Aykroyd, while it's a good time to be a Garrett Morris fan, with the *SNL* troupe-member (Lamorne Morris) given more attention here than he was on the actual show. But others are somewhat lost in the din. The late Gilda Radner may have gotten her own documentary a few years back, but Ella Hunt doesn't manage to make much impact playing the effervescent comedian. Nor do Emily Fairn or Kim Matula as the other female troupe-members, Laraine

KILLER QUOTE

"Television is merely a lava lamp with slightly better audio."
MICHAEL O'DONOGHUE (TOMMY DEWEY)

Top to bottom: Anti-comedian Andy Kaufman (Nicholas Braun); Matthew Rhys as host George Carlin; Troupe-ing the colour: The Not Ready For Prime Time Players.

Newman and Jane Curtin. And Willem Dafoe's sinister "head of talent" feels like an unnecessary addition, a personification of the studio suits who were watching Michaels like hawks, working out whether to boost or destroy him.

The storytelling is broad. Crew members are in disbelief that these young upstarts can pull off a show at all, let alone one that will still be airing half a century later; executives are universally malicious; the *SNL* cast are whirling dervishes of creativity. *Saturday Night* doesn't really get under the skin of anyone, with the exception of a touching subplot about Michaels and his writer wife Rosie Schuster (Rachel Sennott). It doesn't have time to. But while it would have been nice to have gotten more into the nitty-gritty of *how* this miracle of a show operated, the specific solutions to some of the million small problems that arise, that's not this movie. This is a party picture, the kind of crowd-pleaser you'd expect with a title like *Saturday Night*. There's no opportunity for deep character analysis, not while Belushi is AWOL and a llama's just turned up.

It's hagiographic, sure — Reitman revering 90 minutes of (let's be honest, pretty dated) TV comedy as if it's the Sistine Chapel — but what he's really doing here is saluting a *spirit*. A freewheeling, anything-goes brand of comedy that has virtually vanished in Hollywood since the real-life equivalents of Dafoe's character took over. Nowadays, it's rare for a band of entertainers to get their vision on screen undiluted, bee-suits and all. So it's a treat to be reminded of a time when they could. **NICK DE SEMLYEN**

VERDICT The founding of a comedy institution shot as a madcap thriller, ***Saturday Night*** glides over the surface rather than drilling deep, but it's largely a hell of a fun 109 minutes.

Here: Aaron Taylor-Johnson displays some Kraven behaviour. **Below:** Russell Crowe as Kraven's dad Nikolai.

FILM

KRAVEN THE HUNTER

A FILM WHICH LEAVES US KRAVIN' BETTER-QUALITY SUPERHERO MOVIES

★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **127 MINS**

DIRECTOR J.C. Chandor
CAST Aaron Taylor-Johnson, Ariana DeBose, Fred Hechinger, Alessandro Nivola, Christopher Abbott, Russell Crowe

PLOT After being saved from a lion attack by a voodoo potion as a teen, Sergei Kravinoff (Taylor-Johnson) becomes a hunter of criminals.

FOR THE COMIC-book-illiterate, Kraven The Hunter, created by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko in 1964, is a Spider-Man antagonist and co-founder of the supervillain gang the Sinister Six. J.C. Chandor's mostly flat and ludicrous origin story reimagines him as a vigilante Doctor Dolittle, an apex predator who can not only commune with animals but also takes on some of their abilities, such as increased smell, vision and strength. Surprisingly, this is perhaps the part of *Kraven The Hunter* that makes the most sense.

The backstory is leadenly sketched. Taken on safari by his Russian crime-boss father Nikolai (Russell Crowe) to get over his mother's death (as you do), Sergei Kravinoff (Levi Miller) is ravaged by a lion but revived by a potion administered by Calypso Ezili, the granddaughter of a voodoo high priestess, which gives him hallucinations that look like outtakes from a Terrence Malick film. More importantly, it also imbues him with a preternatural ability to stalk prey. Sergei grows up (hello, Aaron Taylor-Johnson), goes to live with the animals in a forest and makes an inventory of bad guys he starts to bump off.

Kraven's to-do-in list brings him into contact with a grown-up Calypso (Ariana DeBose, looking

lost), now an investigative lawyer, his estranged Fredo-a-like brother (Fred Hechinger) and an assassin called The Foreigner (Christopher Abbott), another pre-existing Spidey baddie whose super-power involves counting to three and hypnotising his enemies. Pulling the strings to take over Nikolai's evil empire is mercenary Aleksei Sytsevich (Alessandro Nivola), who can take on the skin of a rhino, something even thicker than Nivola's Russian accent.

Chandor has played in some of these sandboxes before — battles against nature (*All Is Lost*), the dynamics of crime families (*A Most Violent Year*) — but here he's lost his touch. The storytelling is ham-fisted and doesn't really know how to lean into the fun of it all. Although the action does have a pleasingly brutal quality that most comic-book flicks don't have, there's the odd smart action lick and moments of intentional comedy to go with the unintentional ones.

Taylor-Johnson looks the part and displays athletic chops, but can't do much with A4-thin writing. Perhaps having the best time is Crowe as a patriarchal crime-lord with a nifty line in neckerchiefs, endlessly wanging on about fear and refusing to trust anyone who doesn't like Tony Bennett. Unfortunately for all concerned, Chandor's film feels unlikely to establish an ongoing franchise and this hunter may well need a new line of work. 'Kraven The Chartered Accountant', maybe? Or perhaps 'Kraven The Influencer'? Those guns would look great on the 'gram. **IAN FREER**

VERDICT This feels a long way from Chandor's glory days of ***All Is Lost***. Save the occasional flourish, ***Kraven The Hunter*** is limp, tired, uninvolving superhero fare.

Hogging the limelight. **Below:** It wasn't long before the Chaos Cola kicked in.

FILM

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 3

THIRD TIME AROUND FOR THE LORD OF THE RINGS

★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **PG** / **110 MINS**

DIRECTOR Jeff Fowler
CAST Ben Schwartz, Colleen O'Shaughnessey, Idris Elba, Keanu Reeves, Jim Carrey, James Marsden, Tika Sumpter, Krysten Ritter

PLOT Super-swift hedgehog Sonic (Schwartz) takes on new nemeses: the malevolent Shadow (Reeves) and evil moustachioed brainiac Gerald Robotnik (Carrey), relative of his old foe.

AFTER THE PARAMOUNT logo (the stars replaced by gold rings flying towards the iconic mountain) and the Sega ident, *Sonic The Hedgehog 3* rather ironically segues to a large credit for Neal Moritz's production company, 'Original Film'. It's not often a production banner throws unintentional shade on the film that follows, but there is very little that is novel in *Sonic 3*'s subsequent 109 minutes. Director Jeff Fowler's all-too-familiar third adventure for the Blue Blur is probably the pick of the bunch, but this is still the kind of low-hanging fruit — endless quipping, bland moralising, dance routines — meted out by every bog-standard animated kids' flick.

The new element here is the introduction of vengeful villain Shadow The Hedgehog, voiced by Keanu Reeves, unsurprisingly channelling John Wick rather than Ted Logan. Teased in a sting at the end of *Sonic 2*, Shadow is a black-hearted agent of chaos who escapes incarceration after 50 years to wreak havoc on protectors of Earth G.U.N. (Guardian Units of Nations) alongside scientist Gerald Robotnik (Jim Carrey). Soon Sonic (Ben Schwartz) and his lads, Tails The Fox (Colleen O'Shaughnessey) and Knuckles The Echidna

(Idris Elba), are dispatched to manage the mayhem — only to discover they need to team up with Ivo Robotnik (also Carrey), the grandson of Gerald and the series' Big Bad (presumed dead after the second film), to save the day.

The word that comes to mind when describing this Sega saga is scattershot. From the comedy (a fart gag here, a Bea Arthur joke there) to the needle drops (The Traveling Wilburys, The Prodigy, The Beach Boys) to the action (a bike chase in Tokyo, shenanigans over London landmarks), everything has a let's-hope-this-sticks quality. This haphazard approach extends to the thematic material — you can choose from a) listen to your heart, b) trust your friends, c) don't let pain change you, or d) always make the right choice — but none of them are persuasively argued or deeply felt. Key emotional bonds etched are in throwaway montages. Little feels earned or authentic.

On the plus side, *Sonic 3* has more narrative focus and urgency than *Sonic 2*, and there are some genuinely funny moments (a parody of *telenovelas*, a killer Green Lantern gag and the punch-y pomposity of Elba's warrior anteater get some laughs). The MVP of the first two films, Carrey dials down the physical comedy in both his roles, amping up the punning ("Dorkupine!") to hit-and-miss effect. For all the actor's gurning and the film's visual busyness, few images pop or lodge in the memory. Perhaps what's needed is an authored vision. The campaign for Béla Tarr's 'Sonic The Hedgehog 4' starts here. **IAN FREER**

VERDICT **Slightly better than its predecessors, this works hard to entertain — with the odd bright moment — but overall lacks surprise or anything to set the heart racing.**

FILM

EMMANUELLE

★★

OUT **17 JANUARY** / CERT **18** / **107 MINS**
DIRECTOR Audrey Diwan
CAST Noémie Merlant, Will Sharpe, Naomi Watts, Jamie Campbell Bower

Audrey Diwan's follow-up to her Venice-winning abortion drama *Happening* is a strange misstep. The filmmaker should be well placed to offer a nuanced exploration of female sexual agency, but *Emmanuelle* is a world of beautiful surfaces, with nothing substantial underneath. Noémie Merlant — who plays the titular role, bedding clients in a luxury hotel — spends the time wafting vacantly through opulent rooms. Handed a character with no interiority, she flounders. It doesn't help that she's stiffer in English, as is the stilted script from native French speakers Diwan and Rebecca Zlotowski. Watching this feels like flicking back pages in a book, assuming you've missed something, but realising it's just poorly written. **YO**

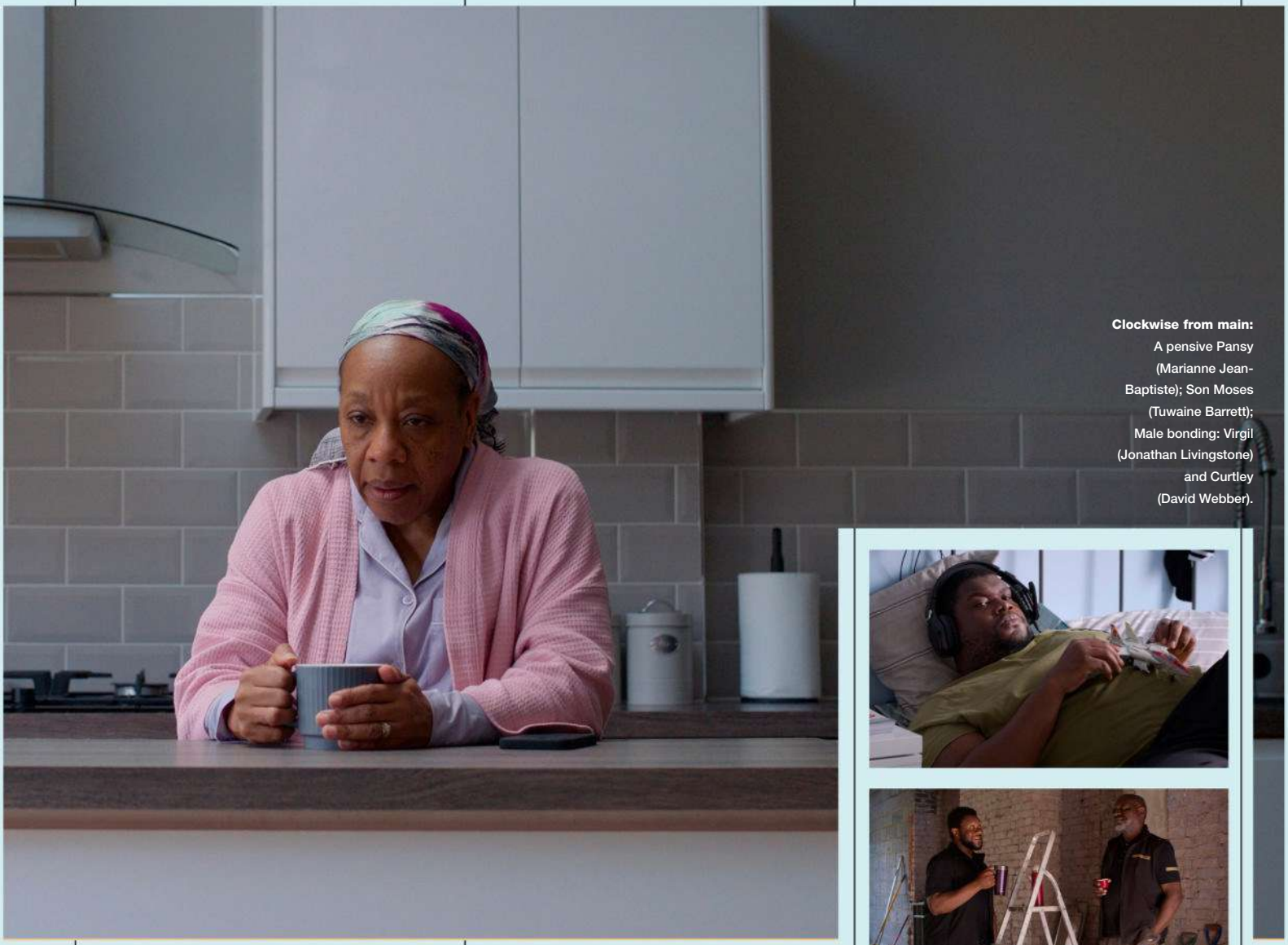
TV

DREAM PRODUCTIONS

★★★★

OUT **NOW (DISNEY+)** / EPISODES VIEWED **4 OF 4**
SHOWRUNNER Mike Jones
CAST Paula Pell, Richard Ayoade, Maya Rudolph, Amy Poehler, Kensington Tallman

This new spin-off series, riding the coattails of *Inside Out 2*'s billion-dollar box office, could have easily muddied the waters of Pixar's emotional series. Happily, it's an absolute treat, expanding the psychologically rich and comedically fertile setting of a pre-teen's brain in deeply satisfying ways. The focus here is on the Hollywood studio-esque Dream Productions: an entire creative industry trying to come up with dreams for their 12-year-old audience-of-one, Riley (Tallman). Like the first two films, it's witty, bright and gorgeously animated, with plenty of neat visual gags (dream workers can be seen reading 'Snoozeweek'). It makes a strong case that *Inside Out* is now officially Pixar's best franchise. **JN**



Clockwise from main: A pensive Pansy (Marianne Jean-Baptiste); Son Moses (Tuwaine Barrett); Male bonding: Virgil (Jonathan Livingstone) and Curtley (David Webber).

FILM

HARD TRUTHS

MIKE LEIGH'S HERO IS NOT SO HAPPY-GO-LUCKY

★★★★

OUT **31 JANUARY** / CERT **12A** / **97 MINS**

DIRECTOR Mike Leigh
CAST Marianne Jean-Baptiste, Michele Austin, David Webber, Tuwaine Barrett, Ani Nelson, Sophia Brown, Jonathan Livingstone

PLOT A reclusive middle-aged woman (Jean-Baptiste) takes her fatalism out on the world, with only her sister (Austin) able to penetrate her armour.

THERE IS NO filmmaker alive who understands the mundanity and quiet grace of the human experience quite like Mike Leigh. Over a decades-spanning career he's found poetry and pathos in the everyday business of being alive. From David Thewlis' nihilistic Johnny in *Naked* to Sally Hawkins' irrepressibly effervescent Poppy in *Happy-Go-Lucky*, his characters feel intensely real while also reflecting a subdued desperation at the heart of British society.

After taking on a larger canvas with *Peterloo*, Leigh makes a welcome return to intimate character studies with *Hard Truths*, shooting in a stripped-down style that echoes the television films that made his name. He reunites with Marianne Jean-Baptiste, who he directed in the Palme d'Or-winning *Secrets & Lies*, and who here gives a truly astonishing performance as a woman who cannot articulate her abject misery.

Pansy (Jean-Baptiste) constantly lashes out at everyone around her, directing her ire at strangers and family members alike. She lives a comfortable suburban life with her resigned husband Curtley (David Webber) and listless adult son Moses (Tuwaine Barrett), but is trapped by antipathy towards humanity that often confines her to her bed. She's like a wounded animal, aggressive out of fear and pain.

Initially, Pansy's poisonous wrath is funnier than it is distressing to witness. A brilliant rant about nonsensical features of baby clothes is a highlight ("What's that baby gonna keep in its pocket?!"). But Pansy is often searingly cruel and spending time with her can be punishing, even as we recognise her profound vulnerability. The truth hurts.

Any warmth in her life comes from her relationship with sister Chantelle (a wonderful Michele Austin), who attempts to envelop Pansy into her own loving family milieu. But this is a Mike Leigh joint, and any expectation that Pansy can be magically healed is misplaced. "Why can't you enjoy life?!" Chantelle asks her in frustration, to which she cannot respond, retreating into herself as if she wants to completely disappear. It's utterly heartbreaking, and at times you might find yourself desperate for the film to end, simply to escape from her relentless fury and gloom.

One of many hard truths is that Pansy's hurt runs so deep, she might never be free from it. Her depression and hostility also acts as a reminder of the isolation we all endured in lockdown and its lingering impact on our collective mental health. But while this film is sometimes unbearably bleak, the tenderness and empathy with which Leigh views her makes it an affecting portrait of a woman in crisis. **LAURA VENNING**

VERDICT **A gruelling but ultimately rewarding experience, this is Leigh at his most confrontational, devastating and humane, aided by the unadulterated power of Jean-Baptiste's career-redefining performance.**

When life gives you Lemmons: Shirley MacLaine with Jack Lemmon in *The Apartment* (1960).

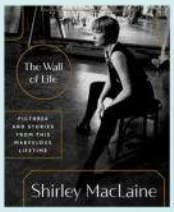
BOOKS

THE WALL OF LIFE

SHIRLEY MACLAINE GOES ON A SHOWBIZ JOURNEY OF A LIFETIME

★★★★

AUTHOR **SHIRLEY MACLAINE**



SHIRLEY MACLAINE HAS written several books, and they're all a fun read, running from anecdotes about filming to slightly kookier musings on spirituality and aliens. But there's something uniquely touching about her latest, a pictoral trip through a life that's been well lived and full of interesting people.

This is not a book that has much to prove. Sure, MacLaine includes pictures with the Dalai Lama, Castro, a handful of the 13 US Presidents she met (she encountered Trump pre-Presidency but says she got bad vibes) and of course the Rat Pack, who she worked with for years — but it never smacks of name-dropping or an attempt to convince you of her own importance. MacLaine has a 70-year career at the peak of showbiz (and an Oscar win) behind her; she doesn't need our approval at the age of 90. These are just people she met, and for the most part liked; this is the life that she's lived. If she were trying to impress you, there'd be fewer affectionate, laughing family photos mixed in among them. Anyway, MacLaine never seemed to care much about impressing anyone.

She's unstinting in her praise of friends (Elizabeth Taylor, Dean Martin) and scathing in her criticism of bullies (Herbert Ross, most notably). She drops the names of lovers casually into the text; MacLaine had an open marriage before it was a thing, and so was free to date Robert Mitchum — among others. No big deal. You begin to wonder if the "long, long walk on the beach" she mentions taking with Bill Clinton is a euphemism for something, except that based on everything else, she'd never be so coy.

There's a loosely chronological structure to the book, but otherwise it's a jumble of the personal, professional and eccentric. What emerge most clearly are her priorities across the years, from family to friends to work; breaking up with her first love to go to Broadway yet having a baby just as her career was taking off. She has been a political campaigner, a passionate one, but also a seeker of UFOs; a world traveller and a sentimental home owner who loves to keep her loved ones on a wall nearby.

The book opens with a picture of MacLaine's grandparents back in the late 1800s or early 1900s, and near the end there's a picture of her in much the same look, filming *Downton Abbey*. It's a testament to how far her work has taken her from her small-town roots, and how much she seems to have relished every single day of the journey. **HELEN O'HARA**

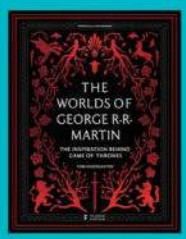
VERDICT **A warm and light meander through the Oscar-winner's extraordinary life and times, which makes up for in charm what it lacks in detail.**

CLEANIN' UP THE TOWN: REMEMBERING GHOSTBUSTERS

★★★

AUTHORS **ANTHONY AND CLAIRE BUENO**

This companion-piece to the documentary of the same name contains extensive interview extracts that may delight *Ghostbusters* completists. The Bueno siblings have written it with evident passion, building on a decade of interviews and work. It could have used a more thorough edit — some establishing facts are never established and there's repetition — but it is well-meaning. **HOH**



THE WORLDS OF GEORGE R.R. MARTIN

★★★★

AUTHOR **TOM HUDDLESTON**

This well-written tome from veteran film writer Tom Huddleston offers a deep dive into the inspirations of the *Game Of Thrones* creator. It's a fascinating peel-back-the-curtain exercise, ranging from the obvious (Hadrian's Wall inspired The Wall) to the more obscure (French author Maurice Druon). While we wait for Martin to finish *The Winds Of Winter*, this is a good stop-gap. **JN**

50 HORROR MASTERPIECES

★★

AUTHOR **EFTYCHIA TURNBULL**

There's nothing wrong with a beginner's guide to a genre, but this new compendium of horror feels a little slim. Each of the films celebrated here — a line-up with few surprises, if you're ever encountered an online 'greatest horrors' listicle — is broken down into sentence-long categories ('Cultural Impact', 'Behind The Scenes' etc) which lack the insight or original analysis you'd wish. Not, alas, a masterpiece. **JN**

Imago

Seong Gi-hun (Lee Jung-jae) feels the pressure. **Below:** Front Man (Lee Byung-hun). **Bottom:** The Squid Game is back and as ruthless as ever.

TV

SQUID GAME: SEASON 2

NETFLIX'S DYSTOPIAN MEGA-HIT IS BACK FOR MORE DEADLY SATIRE

★★★★

OUT **NOW (NETFLIX)** / EPISODES VIEWED **7 OF 7**

SHOWRUNNER Hwang Dong-hyuk
CAST Lee Jung-jae, Wi Ha-joon, Lee Byung-hun, Im Si-wan, Kang Ha-neul, Lee Jin-wook, Park Sung-hoon

PLOT Seong Gi Hun (Lee) has devoted his life to dismantling the deadly Squid Game tournament. Re-entering the trials, he struggles to unite the players and stop the bloodshed.

"WE ALL LIVE in the same country," South Korean director Bong Joon Ho said when asked about the global success of his film *Parasite*. "It's called capitalism." That theory was further proved in 2021 when *Squid Game* became one of the jewels in Netflix's crown, its most watched show ever. Even coming into it with no knowledge of Korean culture, or unable to distinguish a squid game from a *ddakji*, a show about crippling debt forcing desperate people into a deadly tournament had global resonance.

Two years have passed for our protagonist Seong Gi-hun (Lee Jung-jae) after he won ₩45.6 billion (just over £28 million) and he's spent his time trying to track down the recruiter he met on the subway, to figure out a way to bring down the games once and for all. But while in the first season Seong Gi-hun was playing Red Light, Green Light and trying not to be shot by snipers from the very first episode, Season 2 moves at a slower pace. It's not until Episode 3 that contestants start meeting untimely demises. And spending so much of an only-seven-episode season on set-up — then choosing a game that we've seen before — is puzzling, given the anticipation for the newest terrifying torture methods.

Come Episode 4, however, we are off to the literal and metaphorical races, in what may be the best episode of *Squid Game* ever made. It feels like a perfect microcosm of all the show's best elements: nauseatingly tense, blackly hilarious, cartoonishly ridiculous and utterly devastating. It also exemplifies the genius of the structure itself. Even with minimal dialogue, and characters going by numbers rather than names, the many allegiances and betrayals that wordlessly take place under pressure results in a huge ensemble of three-dimensional characters.

The game itself has changed, and so have the reasons for many of the contestants to be there. The population as a whole is younger, many of them saddled with debt from crypto investments, failed influencer careers or medical bills. The economic system that is being satirised has made more people desperate earlier in their lives. When many players revel in transforming their fellow man into an opportunity for a pay day, it makes the gameplay more brutal. But with a season finale which asks more questions than it solves, this very much feels like the middle act of *Squid Game*. Those who want answers will have to wait for its final season, due in late 2025. For now, there are still these seven episodes to enjoy: a dystopian treat for people who still all live in a country called capitalism. **LEILA LATIF**

VERDICT **This middle chapter takes a while to get started but once it properly begins, and we see all the twisted surprises in store, it makes for breathtaking television.**

GAMES

INDIANA JONES AND THE GREAT CIRCLE

THIS VIDEO GAME BELONGS IN A MUSEUM!

★★★★★

PC, XBOX SERIES XIS

Five seconds later, he'd realise he'd picked up a snake.

BASED SOLELY ON its prologue, *Indiana Jones And The Great Circle* seems to be playing things a bit safe: the game begins with an incredibly faithful recreation of *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*'s iconic, idol-robbing opening. But putting players in the path of that big, rolling boulder is a smart move that hints at the phenomenal adventure ahead. It displays how deftly developer MachineGames can adapt the franchise's most famous scene, while also serving as a contrast to the wholly original, cinema-rivalling Indy romp to come.

The thrilling start, which works as a flashback within *The Great Circle*'s 1937 canon setting (wedged between *Raiders*' and *The Last Crusade*'s timelines), proves the game could have easily succeeded as a direct film adaptation, rather than an original story. But, much like its relic-hunting hero, *The Great Circle* takes the less travelled path here and manages to uncover the greatest treasure of all: an all-new *Indiana Jones* adventure that remains true to its cinematic roots, while delivering a totally unique gaming experience.

The sprawling, swashbuckling adventure packs in all the expected interactions, from whip-wielding combat and crypt-crawling puzzles to globetrotting exploration and opportunities aplenty to punch fascists in the face. The series' signature charm, humour, storytelling, soundtrack and set-pieces are all also accounted for. And every one of these authentic elements isn't just polished to a blinding sheen, but fully fleshed out and organically interconnected to put fans under the hat like never before.

It's the countless subtle inclusions complementing these moments, though, that truly make *The Great Circle* special. Like the way Indy doesn't level-up via a typical skill tree, but by seeking out and reading books; or how he can come back from the brink of unconsciousness, mid-brawl, by crawling over to his discarded hat. These touches and countless others — Troy Baker's spot-on Harrison Ford-imitating performance, the deft storytelling, semi-open world maps brimming with meaningful quests and collectibles — brilliantly combine to not only deliver the absolute best Indiana Jones game to date, but one that successfully recaptures the magic of the original film trilogy. **MATT CABRAL**

VERDICT ***The Dial Of Destiny*** **might have failed to ignite much enthusiasm for the ageing archaeologist, but** ***The Great Circle*** **demonstrates there could still be plenty of fortune and glory in the franchise's future.**

BATMAN: ARKHAM SHADOW

★★★★

META QUEST

This VR instalment in the lauded *Arkham* series manages to adapt the fluid, multi-opponent combat near-flawlessly to virtual reality as you pummel minions of new villain the Rat-King. Strategic (and aerobic!) combat combines with stealth and detective puzzles to form a truly immersive *Dark Knight* experience that stands head and pointy cowl above most VR fare. The words, "I'm Batman!" have never felt so true. **JD**

MARVEL RIVALS

★★★

PC, PS5, XBOX SERIES X|S

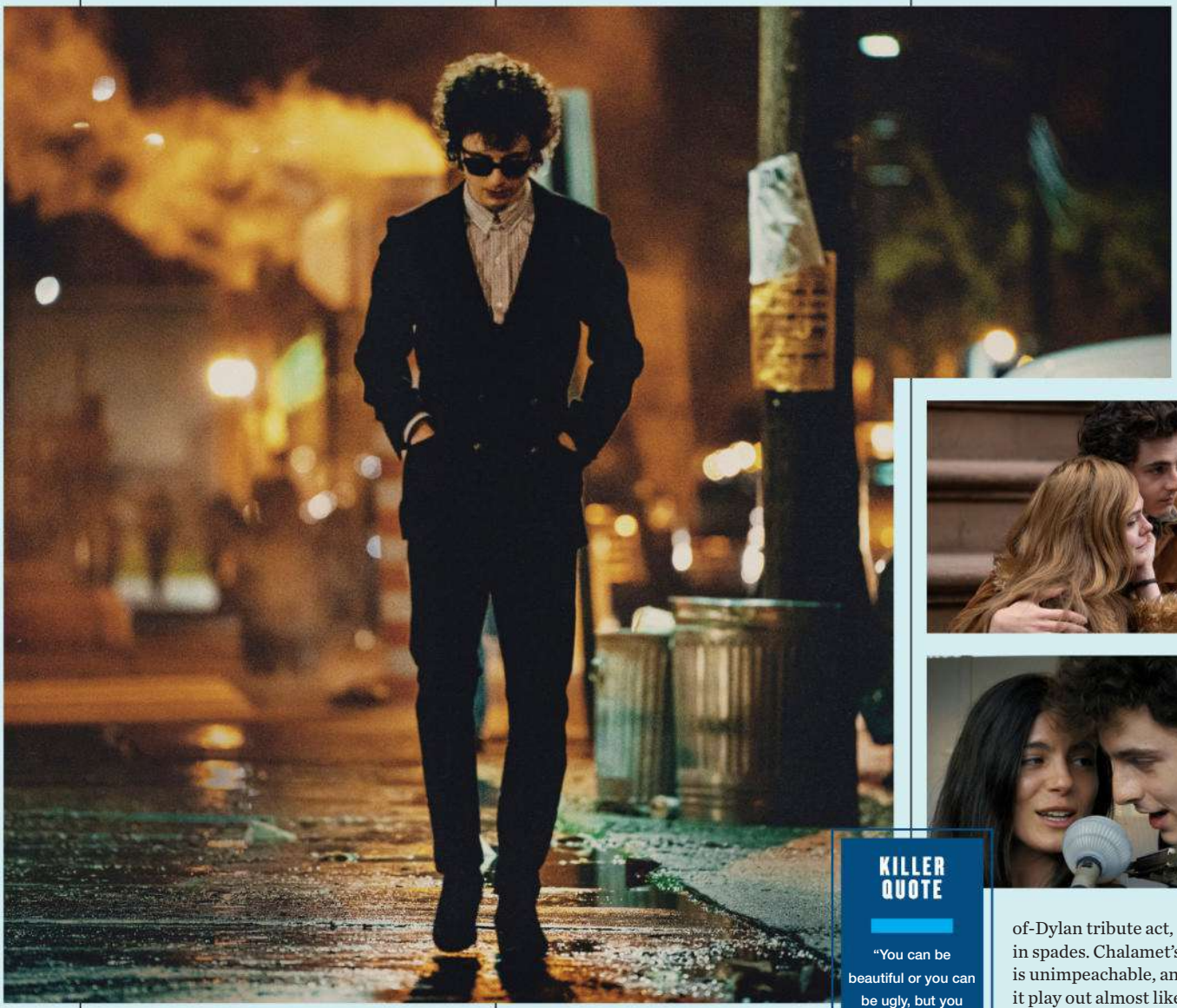
A multiplayer shooter, this colourful outing is basically *Overwatch* for Marvel's superheroes and villains. A voluminous roster of 30-plus characters drawn from comic history impresses, though, with cult favourites Squirrel Girl and Jeff The Land Shark facing off against headliners including Thor and Black Panther, while smart synergies between powers helps *Rivals* stand out. However, only three match modes limits its appeal. **MK**

FANTASIAN NEO DIMENSION

★★★★

PC, PS4, PS5, NINTENDO SWITCH, XBOX SERIES X|S

An RPG from *Final Fantasy* maestro Hironobu Sakaguchi, this story of amnesiac Leo battling an invasion from another reality plays the genre's hits, but its gorgeous crafting means it looks and feels like nothing else. Remastered from its former Apple Arcade exclusivity, enhanced visuals and full voice-acting make this the definitive edition of a hidden gem. **MK**



Left: The thin man: Bob Dylan (Timothée Chalamet). **Below:** Dylan gets close to Sylvie Russo (Elle Fanning); And Joan Baez (Monica Barbaro).

FILM

A COMPLETE UNKNOWN

TIMOTHÉE CHALAMET IS BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

★★★

OUT **17 JANUARY** / CERT **15** / **140 MINS**

DIRECTOR James Mangold
CAST Timothée Chalamet, Edward Norton, Elle Fanning, Monica Barbaro, Boyd Holbrook

PLOT New York, 1961. Singer-songwriter Bob Dylan (Chalamet) aspires to be the voice of a generation. But a controversial switch to the electric guitar is beckoning...

THE BOB DYLAN Cinematic Universe is a-changing. Dozens of films about the legendary singer-songwriter already exist — including two docs by Martin Scorsese, 2007's *I'm Not There* (in which no fewer than six actors took on Dylan), and the bizarre *Masked And Anonymous*, in which Dylan played a version of himself.

There have been many, many ballads of this thin man. This latest effort comes from James Mangold, the filmmaker whose *Walk The Line* inspired the music biopic parody *Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story*, the standard by which all music biopics must now be judged. To its credit, *A Complete Unknown* deftly avoids such clichés. (There is no, "The wrong kid died!" equivalent line here.)

It is, instead, a straightforward, clear-eyed musical drama. It begins in 1961 with a young Bob Dylan (Timothée Chalamet) looking to pay tribute to his hospitalised folk-singing hero, Woody Guthrie (Scoot McNairy). Soon he nestles under the wing of veteran folk singer Pete Seeger (Edward Norton) and finds creative and/or romantic connections with Joan Baez (Monica Barbaro), Sylvie Russo (Elle Fanning) and Johnny Cash (Boyd Holbrook).

The performances here are the film's strongest hand. Chalamet is superb, avoiding a cartoonish impression for something naturalistic and often boyishly arrogant; Norton is sweetly decent, playing a gentle soul who eventually finds himself outpaced by his protégé; Fanning and Barbaro offer humanistic counterpoints. And if you're looking for a best-of-Dylan tribute act, the film delivers in spades. Chalamet's musical talent is unimpeachable, and Mangold has it play out almost like an expertly staged jukebox musical — *Mamma Mia!* for dads, if you like.

KILLER QUOTE

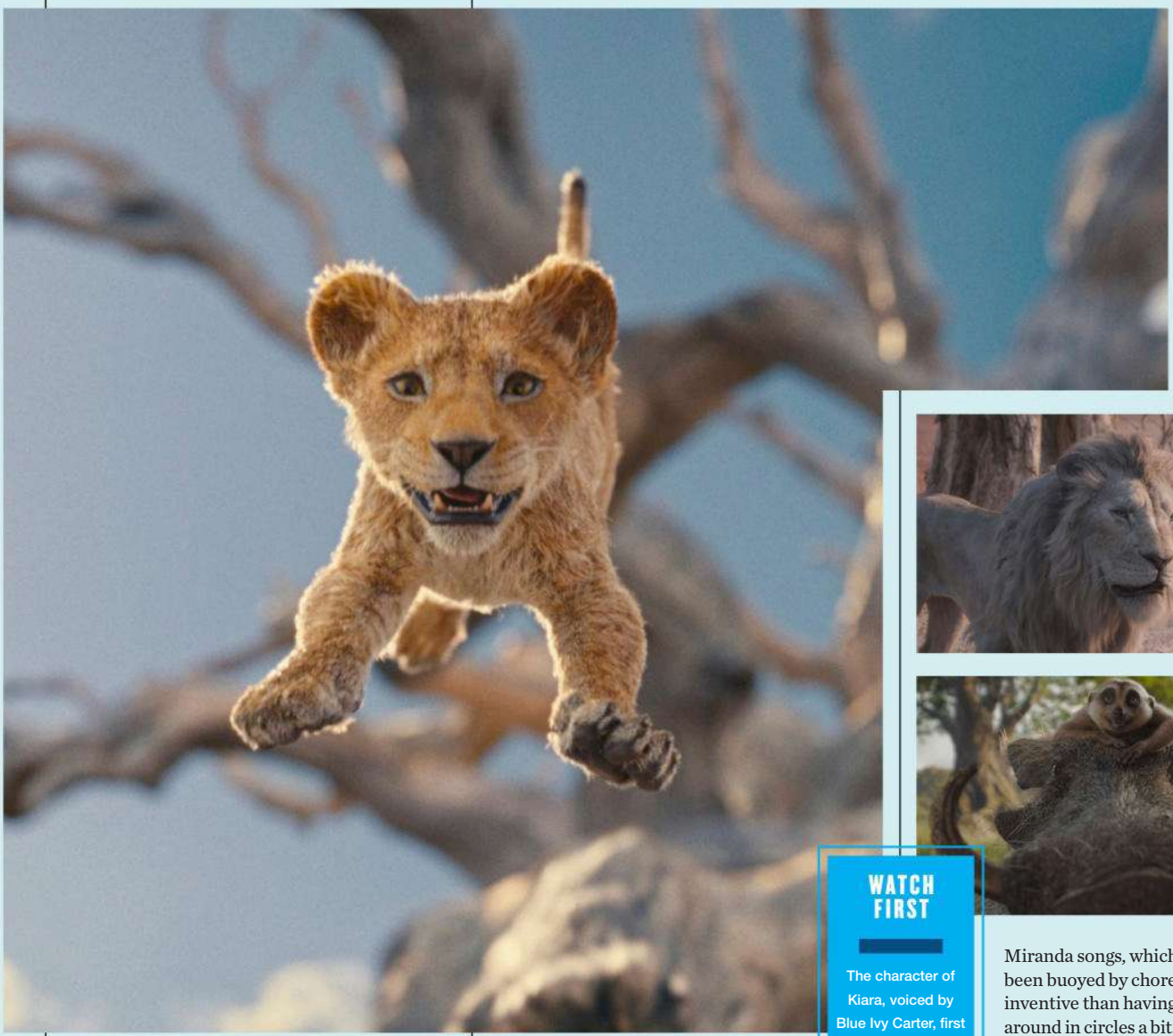
"You can be beautiful or you can be ugly, but you can't be plain."
BOB DYLAN (TIMOTHÉE CHALAMET)

But as lucid and well-mounted as it is, *A Complete Unknown* plays it safe. Adapted from the book *Dylan Goes Electric!* by Elijah Wald, it carries a sense of inevitability with it: of course it ends at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965. If you have even a passing knowledge of the Bob Dylan story, there will be few surprises.

Frustratingly, too, for a story about a poetic genius, it struggles to find something fresh to say. There is some interesting stuff about the burden of talent: Dylan is prone to feverish late-night songwriting bursts during an extraordinarily prolific creative output, often at the expense of his personal relationships or human interaction. ("You're kind of an asshole, Bob," notes Joan Baez, correctly.) But by 1965 he is almost always behind sunglasses, his enigma calcified. The film doesn't claim to understand Dylan, and suggests Dylan might not understand himself, either. That title, it seems, is literal.

JOHN NUGENT

VERDICT **Anyone looking for a revelatory portrait of an iconic artist might be a smidge disappointed. But as conventional as it is, this is still a strikingly well-made musical drama with pitch-perfect performances.**



Clockwise from main: The young Mufasa; Kiros (voiced by Mads Mikkelsen); Timon takes a ride on Pumbaa.

WATCH FIRST

The character of Kiara, voiced by Blue Ivy Carter, first appeared in the 1998 direct-to-video animated sequel *The Lion King II: Simba's Pride*.

FILM

MUFASA: THE LION KING

A FILM THAT IS CONNECTED IN THE GREAT CIRCLE OF FRANCHISES

★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **PG** / **119 MINS**

DIRECTOR Barry Jenkins
VOICES Aaron Pierre, Kelvin Harrison Jr, John Kani, Tiffany Boone, Mads Mikkelsen, Blue Ivy Carter

PLOT Wise old mandrill Rafiki (Kani) tells Simba's daughter Kiara (Carter) the story of young Mufasa (Pierre), and how he became… The Lion King.

WITH THIS PREQUEL to 2019's photoreal-ish re-do of 1994 Disney alpha-hit *The Lion King*, director Barry Jenkins (of *Moonlight* Oscar-win fame) has joined the ranks of cool indie auteurs going for a surprising splash in the studio guard-railed mainstream. But Jenkins seems a stranger fit for this kind of movie than most. A director who excels at portraying raw, emotional humanity and finding beauty in real, location-based settings doing an entirely computer-manufactured film about singing animals? It's unsurprising to learn he came close to turning *Mufasa* down without even reading the script.

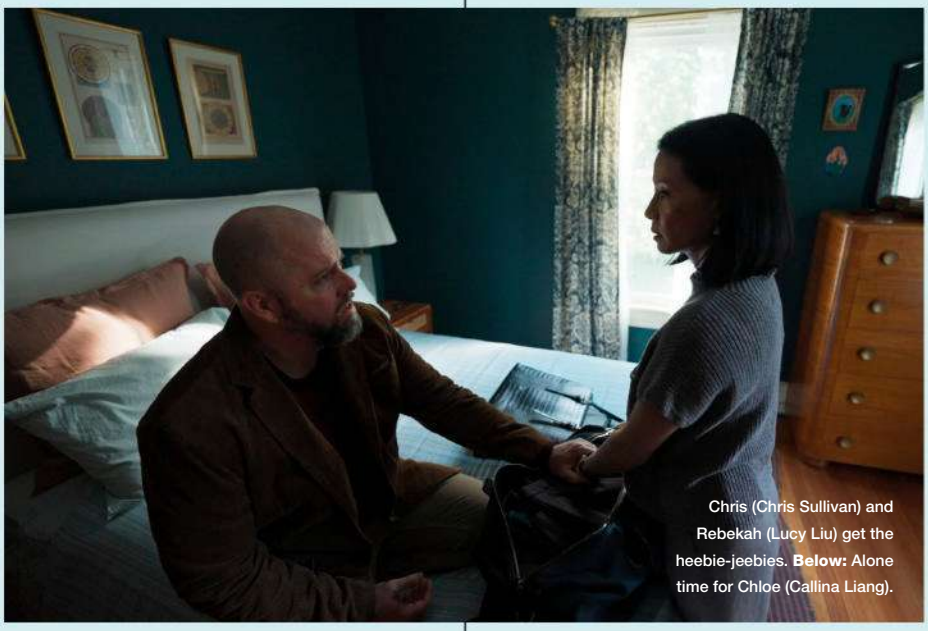
Of course, in the end, he did read it, and you can see why it clicked: the theme of found family that powered *Moonlight* is present here, too, as lion cub Mufasa (Aaron Pierre) is separated from his parents during a raging flash-flood, and is reluctantly taken in by another pride, finding an adoptive brother in its prince, Taka (Kelvin Harrison Jr). Unlike Taka, Mufasa must earn his place through adversity — and feminine perceptiveness, too, it transpires — rather than inheriting it.

Beyond that kernel of Jenkins-ness, however, there is little to really get your teeth into. After an assault on Taka's pride by white-furred outsiders (whose overlord is yet another Mads Mikkelsen villain), the story trots along from points A to B, tossing in some romantic tension (both brothers fancy plucky lioness Sarabi, voiced by Tiffany Boone) and a few pleasant enough Lin-Manuel Miranda songs, which might have been buoyed by choreography more inventive than having the animals go around in circles a bit. It's all framed by a story-time-for-Simba's-cub device, which allows for guest appearances from the 2019 film — most intrusively meerkat Timon (Billy Eichner) and warthog Pumbaa (Seth Rogen), whose hyperactive meta riffing feels a little too desperate to wring laughs from an otherwise mostly sober affair.

And a bloodless one, too. Despite all the photoreal fangs and claws, there's only one notable scratch amid the numerous big-cat conflicts, while all the animals somehow remain immaculate, without a single patch of matted fur between them. This, as much as the continued uncanniness of seeing 'real' beasts sing and talk, jars with the ultra-realist aesthetic and once again makes you yearn for a bolder, more artful approach. Plus, frankly, we could have lived without all the snout-focused, 3D-calibrated framing; hasn't cinema got over this by now?

Still, if the intention was to distract younger audience members with some inoffensive and well-meaning adventure, the movie delivers. It's a shame Jenkins wasn't able to personalise it more, but, as they say, that's just the nature of the beast. **DAN JOLIN**

VERDICT **Barry Jenkins' verve only faintly shines through in an origin story that is mildly, not wildly, entertaining.**



Chris (Chris Sullivan) and Rebekah (Lucy Liu) get the heebie-jeebies. **Below:** Alone time for Chloe (Callina Liang).

FILM

PRESENCE

STEVEN SODERBERGH'S RETIREMENT CONTINUES APACE

★★★★

OUT **24 JANUARY** / CERT **TBC** / **85 MINS**

DIRECTOR Steven Soderbergh
CAST Lucy Liu, Julia Fox, Chris Sullivan, Eddy Maday, Callina Liang, West Mulholland

PLOT As a fractured family struggle to settle into their new home, a ghost watches their every move.

STEVEN SODERBERGH HAS never been one to shy away from formal experimentation. Whether he is working within the studio system or independently, shooting on 16mm film or an iPhone, innovation is his trademark. His next audacious venture arrives in the form of *Presence*, which was shot in secret in the summer of 2023 and finds the filmmaker reinventing the paranormal thriller through an original point of view — in more ways than one.

Soderbergh acts as his own cinematographer, and his camera assumes the first-person perspective of a ghost, floating through the hallways of a spacious, suburban home. Matriarch Rebecca (Lucy Liu) and her nuclear family have moved in, and the spirit watches on as a seemingly idyllic unit begins to show its cracks. Captured in hypnotic long takes and wide angles, Rebecca fawns over her star-athlete son Tyler (Eddy Maday) while her daughter Chloe (Callina Liang) languishes in isolation. In the next room, her husband (Chris Sullivan) wonders if it's even worth staying.

Despite its premise, *Presence* is more family drama than supernatural horror. The house's cohabitant isn't a malicious ghost seeking to terrorise its roommates, but one that's benevolent, curious and perhaps even frightened. Much of the film plays out

episodically with the spirit as a silent observer, but there are moments where it interferes, inviting the viewer to be more than just a voyeur, almost an active participant. When Chloe notices the spectre orbiting her and stares directly down the lens, there's an eerie sensation of feeling like you're somewhere where you shouldn't be. The jittery reaction from the camera only heightens that feeling. There's a reason for Chloe's awareness: her best friend has recently passed, and she starts to believe her ghost has followed her here.

Grief in horror is an eye-roll-inducing trope at this point, but *Presence* instead considers what to do to help the bereaved. Do you allow them to recover alone, or do you step in when their heartbreak fuels unhealthy manners of coping? The latter manifests in Tyler's increasingly suspect friend Ryan (West Mulholland), who takes a romantic interest in Chloe and adds contrived drama in a story that is otherwise delicately handled. Nevertheless, it's all held together by a small but mighty cast: Liu is unsurprisingly spectacular, but Liang (in only her second film) is the real discovery, burying Chloe's grief under steady composure. *Presence* lacks in scares, but terrifying audiences never appears to be the intention. Rather, Soderbergh's unconventional ghost story situates the camera as a compelling character of its own. The result is haunting.
IANA MURRAY

VERDICT **Steven Soderbergh's first-person experiment is a gamble that pays off massively. This is an eerie family drama that turns the horror genre inside out and infuses it with greater empathy.**

also out

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CARRY-ON
★★★★ FILM
"*Die Hard* karaoke this may be, but it delivers. (The radio banter is pure McClane and Gruber.) Look forward to future eye-rolling debates as to whether it qualifies as a Christmas movie." **JAMES DYER**

I'M STILL HERE
★★★ FILM
"This explores a specific political moment through the lens of a grounded family drama. Fernanda Torres gives a striking performance, even if the film doesn't entirely land as distinctive in its own right." **GAVIA BAKER-WHITELAW**

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★★★★ TV
"This adaptation of the book by Gabriel García Márquez simply should not work. Capturing its essence seems impossible. Yet capture it they have — and remarkably better than anyone could've hoped for." **DAVID OPIE**

THE ORDER
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"Justin Kurzel's fascination with the grisliest elements of society — massacres, serial killers and now neo-Nazis — continues to produce solidly compelling work. This is a gripping procedural thriller, buoyed by thoughtful turns from Jude Law and Nicholas Hoult." **JOHN NUGENT**

GET AWAY
★★★ FILM
"Nick Frost both stars in and wrote this holiday-gone-wrong horror-comedy, which inevitably invites comparisons to *Shaun Of The Dead*. It's a different beast — but its wild, gonzo, go-for-broke third act makes it worth the trip." **JOHN NUGENT**

RAGING

BACK

THE ORIGINAL FILM SCARED THE LIFE OUT OF US ALL — AND KICK-STARTED A WHOLE NEW WAVE OF SKIN-ROTTING HORROR. NOW, WITH 28 YEARS LATER, DIRECTOR DANNY BOYLE AND WRITER ALEX GARLAND HAVE RETURNED WITH A VENGEANCE. FANCY A BITE?

WORDS **OLLY RICHARDS**

Crowds can be unsettling. Squeezing through throngs of London's Christmas shoppers, all brimming with a combustible mix of festive cheer and tetchy frustration, *Empire*'s eye is caught by a TV in the lobby of a glass office building. A news channel displays the chyron, "Lab-made 'mirror bacteria' could endanger all life on Earth." We don't hear the details — it's probably fine? — but it feels unwelcomely ominous, given who we're on our way to meet.

A few minutes later, thoroughly jostled, we're sitting down at *Empire* HQ with Danny Boyle and Alex Garland, a duo who collectively scared cinemagoers half daft in 2002. *28 Days Later*, written by Garland and directed by Boyle, began with a rage-inducing virus escaping a medical facility and ended with the UK overrun by infected cannibals looking for throats to rip out. 'Zombie' movies had been out of fashion since the 1970s, until *28 Days Later* came along with its sprinting monsters, daylit horror, and social commentary. It was a hit, launched Garland's film career, and inspired countless imitators. It seemed like it should be the start of a major horror franchise, yet somehow, after one solid sequel, it keeled over, apparently never to rise again.

"We used to have grievance meetings where we talked about how much money people were making by copying us," laughs Boyle. Movies like *World War Z*, TV shows like *The Walking Dead* and games like *The Last Of Us* rode the new wave of 'zombie' popularity they'd started.

It's taken more than two decades, but Boyle and Garland are finally making a very belated return to the world they created. With *28 Years Later* they're hoping to redefine the genre once more with not just one film, but a trilogy that will both explore their original concept in a completely new way, and treat horror with a grandeur it's rarely granted.

Getting here, though, took blood, sweat and an almost ruined friendship.

In 2000, Alex Garland pitched *28 Days Later* to producer Andrew Macdonald over pizza in Fitzrovia. Macdonald and Danny Boyle had just made *The Beach*, based on Garland's novel. After many conversations on that film, Macdonald says "it was clear Alex wanted to try and write films. He said, 'I've got this idea. It's post-apocalyptic. There are zombies who aren't zombies — they're infected. They run fast. It takes place in daylight. And it's bloody terrifying.' I said, 'Yep. Okay. Great.'" Within two years, *28 Days Later* was in cinemas and on its way to $85 million at the box office, on a budget of around $8.4 million (£6 million).

Clockwise from main: The chase is on; Director Danny Boyle with Aaron Taylor-Johnson and Alfie Williams; Mum Isla (Jodie Comer) with Dr Kelson (Ralph Fiennes); The doctor will see you now.

Juan Carlos Fresnadillo's *28 Weeks Later* followed in 2007 — with Garland and Boyle only involved as executive producers — and while it was a lesser hit and a lesser film, it did well enough that a third seemed inevitable. But nobody could make it work.

"We talked about it a lot," says Garland. "There was a really odd idea that we knocked around, about Chinese Special Forces coming into this country and what they find when they arrive." That was at least eight years ago, says Garland, possibly more. They commissioned a writer to turn the idea into a script, but it sat, untouched, for years.

There was another reason things stalled. For a long time, Garland and Boyle had no intention of working together again. Their experience on *Sunshine*, the movie they chose to make instead of *28 Weeks Later*, was not a happy one. "We had a falling out," says Boyle cheerfully. "It was [my fault]."

Garland says he has always written scripts that leave "space" for audience interpretation ("I'm constantly being upbraided for it [in reviews]"). He doesn't like to spell everything out. On *Sunshine*, those spaces were, thought Boyle, too big. "Sci-fi. Fucking *Christ*," says Boyle. "You are really inventing the world in every single precious detail. I remember becoming obsessed with that." He wanted light. Garland wanted shade. "I wrote a prologue to try to explain it all," says Boyle, "and [Alex] said, 'If you fucking put that on the film, I'm off.'"

It was a professional falling out, rather than any personal animosity ("It wasn't a grudge," says Boyle), but serious enough that Garland felt a need to apologise. "You wrote a very sweet note, saying, 'I'm sorry we had such a miserable time together and I hope you have a much better time on the next film,'" says Boyle to Garland. "I've still got the note." Boyle's next film was *Slumdog Millionaire*, which went quite well, winning Boyle an Oscar.

Any vestiges of bad feeling dissipated in 2014, when Garland was making *Ex Machina*, his first film as director. "I thought, 'I need to show this to Danny. I need to know what Danny thinks'... Then I remember reaching out." Quite soon after, they were discussing *28* sequel plans again.

Andrew Macdonald says the thing that really got the project moving was when he regained the rights to *28 Days Later*. To give the least convoluted version: the original two films were released by 20th Century Fox, which became part of Disney in 2019. In 2023, the rights to *28 Days Later* reverted to DNA, Macdonald's production company.

"At that point we actually controlled it," says Macdonald. "We weren't going to have to please anybody but ourselves. And at the same time there was a moment where Danny and Alex were open to it." Progress accelerated enormously. Garland dusted off the old Chinese Special Forces concept and took his own pass at it, writing a full script, which, he says, "was enough for Danny to say, 'I don't want to do *this*, but I do want to do this.' So I went away and came up with something completely different."

"Alex being Alex, he came back literally three months later with the script that we made," says Macdonald. This was in late 2023. "It was a wholly different approach," says Boyle. "It was about what that 28 years gives you." That idea, and the rights to the past films and future sequels, were sold to Sony in January 2024, and *28 Years Later* was on. By May it was shooting. It was an idea Garland would never have come up with had it not been for an event that changed Britain just a few years earlier.

In 2020, a frightening and seemingly unstoppable virus spread through the world. For months, London's streets stood empty, an eerie echo of *28 Days Later*'s opening minutes. There may not have been bloodthirsty gangs marauding across the country, but suddenly Boyle's original film looked all too plausible. *28 Days Later* saw a huge streaming spike that year.

But it wasn't the pandemic Garland was thinking of when he cracked *28 Years Later*. ›

It was a slightly earlier seismic British event. "Covid was not in my mind because it was too recent and too present," Garland says, "but Brexit was." Particularly, it was how Brexit made the rest of the world look at the UK. "A sense of the globe just sort of shifting its position," he says. "Turning their backs, not really looking in this direction. Not really giving a shit [about the UK]."

In *28 Years Later*, nearly three decades after the initial infection, the UK has been ravaged by the virus and become a literal plague island. "Nothing is allowed into Britain and nothing is allowed out," says Macdonald. "Britain has paused." The rest of the world is largely untouched by the virus and wants to keep it that way.

28 Weeks Later ended with a horde of infected rampaging through Paris, which begs the question of whether that movie has been wiped from the timeline. This is not a continuation of that story, but Garland says that film and this are "not in conflict", though adds that the term "canon" is "not a very Danny Boyle word". In other words, this is where those "spaces" come in. Don't expect to have all dots neatly joined. "It's not mapped out like a scientific formula," says Boyle.

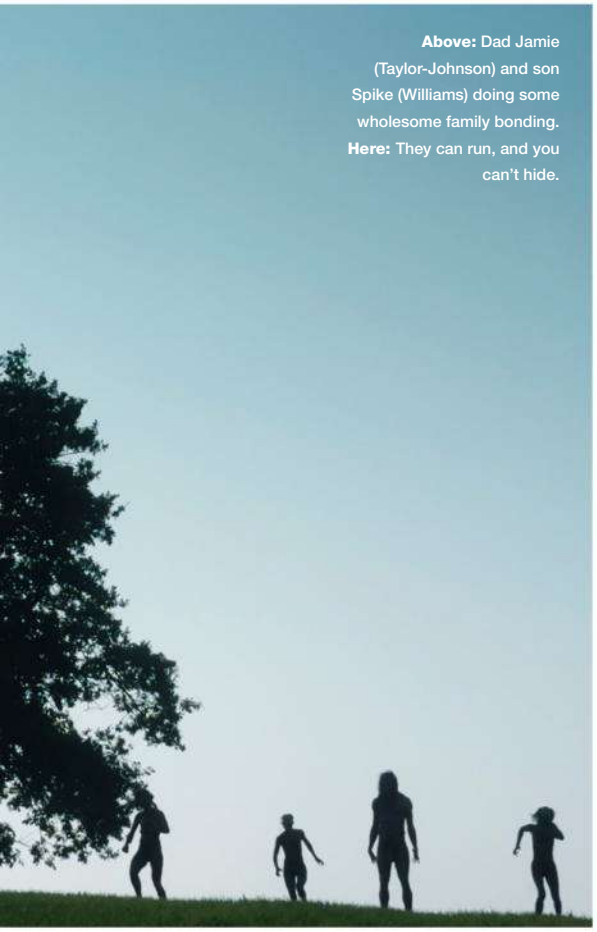
In at least one part of Britain, life continues. On Lindisfarne, aka Holy Island, a 1,000-acre land mass about a mile off the north-east coast of England, a very small community has sealed itself in, in an attempt to keep infection out. It's tethered to the outside world only by a thin causeway, crossable for a brief time each day. For all intents and purposes, it is its own nation.

"It's a closed and necessarily very tight community," says Boyle. "There are very strict defence laws, obviously, to survive that long in what is effectively an ongoing hostile environment. They've created a successful community, as they see it."

"As they see it" is the key phrase there. In this new reality, community is a fragile thing. As the country has collapsed, so have traditional models of rule. "Who their authority figures are is a running theme," says Boyle. One of the reasons Garland and Boyle chose to set the film 28 years later is not just for titular neatness, but because it makes the pre-virus world vividly recent for some, almost mythical history to others.

"Danny and I would spend a lot of time talking about this," explains Garland. "What would it mean? What has changed? What does it do to someone who doesn't remember, half-remembers, fully remembers? We have generations. We have people who fully remember [a time before], people who have no way of remembering, and then points in-between. That's where the story came out of."

While this is about a nation — and to an extent, a world — trying to survive, it is also the story of a small family who just want to be happy. And live.



Above: Dad Jamie (Taylor-Johnson) and son Spike (Williams) doing some wholesome family bonding. **Here:** They can run, and you can't hide.

Children are very important in this," says Danny Boyle. At the heart of *28 Years Later* is Spike (newcomer Alfie Williams). Spike is 12, so has never known any world outside quarantine. He lives in the Holy Island community with his mum, Isla (Jodie Comer), and dad, Jamie (Aaron Taylor-Johnson), who were born in Newcastle. Spike has always been protected from the infected, but he's of an age where he has to learn of the danger outside. The time has come for him to face what lies across the water, where the infected roam free. So, if the time comes, he can defend himself against it.

Those in the community need to occasionally leave the island. On one of those trips they take Spike "for training, rites of passage", as Macdonald puts it, and then, Macdonald continues, "things happen, as they do in these types of films" — for clarity, *not good things* — and Spike and his mother find themselves travelling far, far from safety.

This family element was the only thing that survived from the earlier drafts. "There's a really interesting dynamic between mother and son," says Comer. "Her relationship is the thing that's keeping her going in this world they're living in. Spike's a real beacon of light for her." Spike is the only one in the family to whom this world is 'normal', because he's never known anything else. Isla and Jamie were both children when the virus broke out. Jamie, who was about 13, is old enough to remember it clearly. "You can imagine all the aspects of abandonment, neglect, trauma, fear [the parents feel]," says Taylor-Johnson, "but they've found safety and security in this home... They're a family."

Outside the relatively safe confines of the commune, Spike and Isla encounter a doctor, played by Ralph Fiennes. "He's a survivor, and the way he survived is very interesting," says Fiennes. "He's quite out-there in his views on the world. I think audiences will assume something about him and then see where it goes."

There has already been quite a lot of assuming about one member of the cast. Or rather one presumed member of the cast. Tom Rothman, chairman of Sony Pictures Motion Picture Group, confirmed in May that Cillian Murphy would return as bicycle messenger Jim from the first film "in a surprising way, and in a way that grows". But when the subject of Murphy comes up, there is much umming, ahhing and subject-changing from the filmmakers.

Andrew Macdonald does say, "I think it was probably a bit of a mistake that we didn't bring his story into [*28 Weeks Later*], in a way. [On] this, we wanted him to be involved and he wanted to be involved. He is not in the first film, but I'm hoping there will be some Jim somewhere along the line. He's involved at the moment as an executive producer and I would hope we can work with him in some way in the future in the trilogy." ›

GOING VIRAL

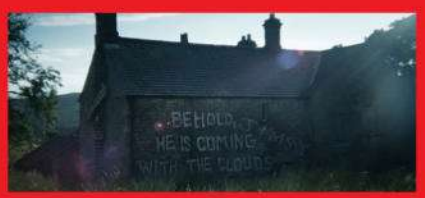
HOW THE *28 YEARS LATER* TEASER TRAILER INFECTED THE INTERNET

THE TELETUBBIES

The Teletubbies are absurd at the best of times, but deployed here, dancing peculiarly (do they know any other way?) on TV while a bunch of kids watch, just before an adult bursts in with a terrifying warning… here, they're a nightmare, their plinky-plonk music the sound of torture.

THE TEASE

Within seconds, that TV screen is splattered with blood. There's a lot of terror in this trailer but it really is a teaser, showing us a lot while telling us next to nothing. It sets the tone and serves up some shocking imagery, but most importantly it gets our adrenaline — and our hopes — up.



THE POEM

Thirty-two seconds in, it begins: ye olde actor Taylor Holmes' unfettered 1915 recital of Rudyard Kipling's 'Boots'. The 1903 poem was written from the perspective of a British Army infantryman on the march, the sound of one man losing his mind, and in this instance, has roughly the same effect on the viewer.

THE RESULT

With trailers practically spilling out of our phones, it can be hard for one to really push through, but this broke through the noise. It quickly became the second-most-watched horror trailer of all time (after *It: Chapter Two*), for good reason: it's genuinely upsetting. Quite an achievement, to do all that in two minutes. God only knows what the whole film has in store. **ALEX GODFREY**

Boyle and Garland are amused by the obsession with Murphy, and particularly the way social media — and many media outlets — reported that Murphy made an appearance in *28 Years Later*'s trailer as a skeletal infected. That's not him (it's an extra called Angus Neill) and it was no in-joke from the filmmakers. Neither saw the kerfuffle coming. "I showed my girlfriend the trailer and she said, 'People will think that's Cillian,'" says Boyle. "I said, 'Don't be silly.' I ignored her. So I've eaten a bit of humble pie since."

Murphy may not be an infected — at least definitely not *that* one — but there are still plenty of those about.

Just as the people on Holy Island have had to evolve over the past 28 years, so have their enemies. This is where it becomes quite key that *28 Years Later*'s monsters are 'infected', not zombies, because zombies are dead and the dead don't change. A virus is a living thing that adapts to survive. "How are these infected still around?" says Garland. "One of the differences with our version of this sort of 'zombie/infected' genre is that they're not supernatural. They were not dead people reanimated, essentially by magic. We had a virus... That means they need to consume energy."

Six months ahead of release, Garland and Boyle remain tight-lipped on the specifics of the virus' evolution, but one thing the infected definitely still are is very, very angry. Comer says scenes with them were genuinely horrifying. "The thing about our stunt performers playing the infected is they really don't take the speed off for you," she says, wide-eyed. "They *chase you*. There were so many moments where I felt like I was actually running for my life!" She remembers the glee on Boyle's face during action scenes. "He just said, 'I *love* this stuff.' I said, '*Why*?' 'Because you just have to go there. You can't fake it. You have to really go there in order for the audience to be with you.'"

Boyle had only directed four films when he made *28 Days Later*, and none of them horror, or really even action. This is his 14th. "It's not about the confidence I have now, because that comes and goes," he says of the different experiences of the two films, "but now there's a *steeliness* to make sure you don't fall back on cliché. Reading this script, I thought, 'Wow, we can do something really different here.'"

He and cinematographer Anthony Dod Mantle, returning from *28 Days Later*, used a big bag of tricks to capture the action. Despite early reports that the whole film was shot on iPhone, Macdonald clarifies they were only "part of a toolkit" that also included drones, other digital cameras, and film cameras. And Taylor-Johnson says Boyle kept a loose approach to the shoot, changing plans if the weather shifted — which it did *a lot* on an island in the North Sea — or if

Clockwise from main: Where's Bear Grylls when you need him?; Sorry, folks, it ain't Cillian Murphy — extra Angus Neill breaks the internet; Comer and Boyle chat terrifying dystopia; Just walk away..

a new possibility came to him: "He adapts and he's very instinctual. He's still very meticulous about what he wants and makes bold choices, but he does it with such joy."

Boyle and Garland are both aware that they're not coming into the same horror environment they screamed into with *28 Days Later*. The many, many imitators, good and bad, that followed have offered almost every permutation of zombie horror imaginable. They had to make sure to come up with fresh viewpoints.

The setting was part of dodging cliché. "We avoided towns and cities, partly because of survival instinct [of the characters], because of how dangerous they'd be," says Boyle, "but also because we made such an impression with the first one with how we depicted London, we thought we'd be crazy to try to top that."

Macdonald says that potential limitation of not using cities became a benefit, and that one of the great attractions of this idea for all involved was that it's both uniquely British and of a size almost never seen in British films. "You just don't get to do a story on this scale in this country," he says. "To do something in Britain that feels like it has [size], it's great." And when he says "scale", he's not just talking spectacle.

People have these cynical ideas about trilogies," sighs Garland. In an era when franchises get divided up seemingly arbitrarily, audiences are wise to the idea that turning one film into many can be a cash-grab. *28 Years Later* is conceived as a three-part story. The second, subtitled *The Bone Temple*, has already been shot, by Nia DaCosta (*Candyman*), and will be in cinemas in January 2026. The third, says Macdonald, is "contingent on the success of the story... and what an audience feels about it", i.e. box-office dollars.

Garland insists that making three films was no mercenary choice. "In the real world, it's actually a huge financial risk," he says. "This is very narratively ambitious. Danny and I understood that. We talked about a lot of different permutations. 'Scorsese's making three-hour-plus movies. Is that possible [for this]?' We tried to condense it, but its natural form felt like a trilogy."

The (hopefully) three parts will, says Garland, be "pretty much totally continuous", narratively, but the prominence of characters will change as the story grows. Fiennes says he is "a much bigger part of the next one" (he shot a week on Boyle's film; a month on DaCosta's). "He strides forward into the second film in an enormous way," says Boyle of Fiennes character, "where the question of what he's after and what he wants to do gets fully resolved." Jack O'Connell, who is briefly in the first film, becomes a significant character in the second.

Boyle says he didn't direct the second because they "wanted to break up the club" of long-term collaborators and bring in a new voice. DaCosta got the job not just on her CV, but because she opened her meeting saying, "'I'm not going to make a pastiche of a Danny Boyle movie,'" according to Garland. "It was a very smart thing to say, particularly in front of Danny Boyle." Boyle hoots at the memory: "Good on ya!"

A real trilogy is not just unusual in horror, or British films. Garland argues a *true* trilogy is a rare thing in all of cinema. "How many genuine trilogies are there?" he asks. "Actually *conceived* as trilogies, not just made one after another because they generated money?" He cites *Star Wars* and *Lord Of The Rings* as legitimate examples, but struggles to think of others. That is the level of storytelling heft this could have; horror with the narrative depth of *The Lord Of The Rings*.

Where the *28 Years Later* trilogy might go, the possibilities are endless. As we all know too well, viruses adapt and rarely respect barriers. Whatever comes next, audiences won't have to wait too long this time. The *28* franchise has lain dormant long enough. It's back now. And it will not be contained.

***28 YEARS LATER* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 20 JUNE**

THROUGH THE MCU AND BEYOND, DIRECTORS JOE AND ANTHONY RUSSO, ALONGSIDE SCREENWRITERS CHRISTOPHER MARKUS AND STEPHEN McFEELY, HAVE MADE FOR ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL CREATIVE TEAMS IN HOLLYWOOD.

BEING

WITH THEIR SPRAWLING ROBOT EPIC **THE ELECTRIC STATE** ON THE WAY, WE GET THEM ALL TOGETHER TO TALK THE NUTS, THE BOLTS AND THE SHOUTING MATCHES

WORDS
CHRIS HEWITT

NERS

you're ever having an argument down the pub about the great directorial streaks, here's one to consider alongside the likes of Coppola 1972-'79, or Carpenter 1974-'86, or Laughton 1955-'55. Between 2014 and 2019, Joe and Anthony Russo directed *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, *Captain America: Civil War*, *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame*. As runs go, that's not half bad.

The Russos could do this all day, but they can't do it alone. The input of others was crucial — Kevin Feige, for one, Robert Downey Jr and Chris Evans, for two, the entire production crew, for thousands more. But arguably the most important was the contribution of the guys who wrote all four of those movies, Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely. Thrown together when the Russos were hired to direct *The Winter Soldier*, the dual duos very quickly hit it off, so much so that when *Avengers: Endgame* signalled the Russos' MCU endgame, they took Markus and McFeely with them to their new company, AGBO, as Co-Presidents Of Story.

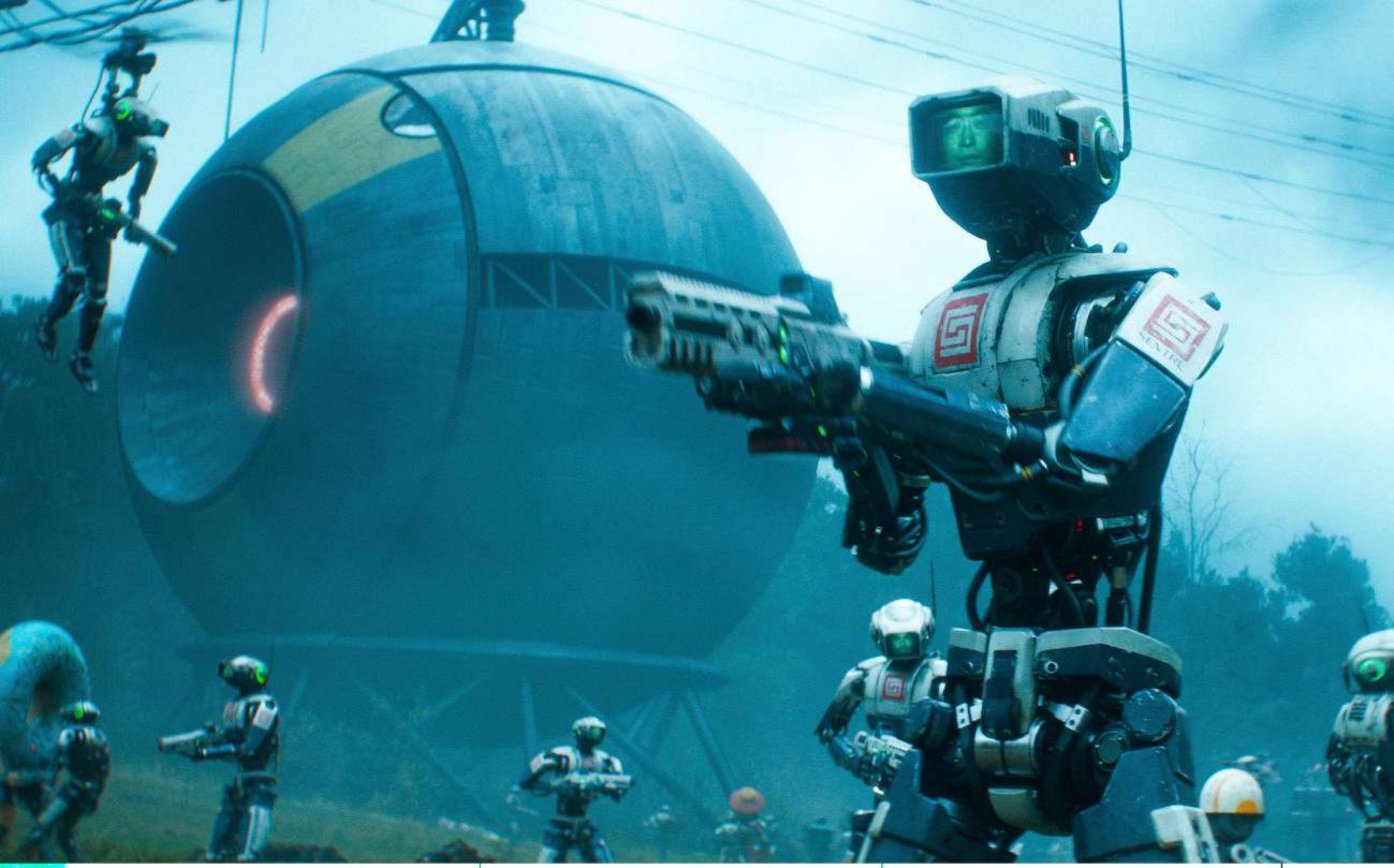
And they've reunited once more on *The Electric State*, an epic sci-fi that sees the quartet play on their biggest canvas since leaving the MCU. Inspired by Simon Stålenhag's 2018 graphic novel, it posits an alternative history of the United States, one in which robots are machina non grata after an unsuccessful uprising against their unappreciative, exploitative human masters. Against this backdrop, a young woman (Millie Bobby Brown's Michelle) teams up with a smuggler (Chris Pratt's Keats) to try to unravel a mystery surrounding the disappearance of her young brother. It's by turns intimate, epic, action-packed, thought-provoking, tonally dexterous, and sometimes decidedly, deliberately weird.

So it seems like the perfect time to get the Russos and Markus/McFeely into a virtual room together to talk about their ongoing partnership, and their secret sauce. It has to be a virtual room because, on the November day when *Empire* talks to them, they're scattered to the four winds: Anthony Russo and Markus are in their offices at AGBO's Los Angeles HQ, Joe Russo is dialling in from London, where he's directing episodes of the second season of their Prime Video show, *Citadel*. And as for McFeely, well, he's in a stark (but not Stark) room at Marvel Studios, where he's hard at work turning out the screenplay for *Avengers: Doomsday*, the movie that marks his and the Russos' (without Markus, who's remaining at AGBO) surprise return to the MCU. Over an hour of candid and cordial chat, we talk about that, the origins and development of their working relationship, and what they can learn from R.E.M..

Clockwise from main: Smuggler Keats (Chris Pratt), right; Orphan Michelle (Millie Bobby Brown) with smiley robot Mr Peanut (Woody Harrelson); Stephen McFeely, Joe Russo, Anthony Russo and Christopher Markus; Tech entrepreneur Ethan Skate (Stanley Tucci); Class act: Head-set lessons are the in thing.

Do you remember when you all first met? Was it on *Winter Soldier*?
Stephen McFeely: I would say 2012. We'd written a first draft and they started searching for directors. *Thor: The Dark World* was a little bit in flames, and they said, "Hey, can you guys go help out?" And when we came back they said, "We've got directors [for *Winter Soldier*], these two guys from TV." We went, "Oh, that's what you did? Did you look that hard? What happened?"
Anthony Russo: The way you're describing it, your reaction to us being hired for *Winter Soldier* was somewhat similar to Comic-Con's when Kevin announced us in Hall H.
Christopher Markus: There was rapid Googling.
McFeely: And then we spent the next year taking what was a pretty good starter script and beating the hell out of it into, arguably, our tightest script. It was a lot of us sitting in a room and trying to take B-minus scenes and turn them into A-minus scenes.
Markus: We refuse to get them higher than an A-minus.
Joe Russo: I don't remember the first time we met.
Markus: I remember being in the conference room in [Marvel's HQ in] Manhattan Beach.
McFeely: It's not like a first date where you go, "I remember the Trevi Fountain, and we had wine." All of our meetings for the first six months were in rooms that looked like this.

Did you click right away as a foursome? You were two working partnerships suddenly thrust together.
Markus: I think the working partnerships probably made it easier, because we're all used to working with someone else. When you're a team meeting a single person, someone's going to get defensive, but Steve and I are used to it, Joe and Anthony are used to it. So it was really sort of an amplification of what we were already doing.
Anthony Russo: That's what I remember as well, just sitting down and talking and talking and talking. It just flowed.
McFeely: We'd been through the experience of a director coming in and saying, "Here's how I see it, and here are the changes I have." And ›



I found that with Joe and Anth, the reason this has lasted so long is because the things they said were things I wish I'd said. It was a rare experience, and I said, "We should continue to do that."

Joe Russo: We're all very collaborative. Best idea wins, and nobody deviates from that methodology. It always clicked, and as the years went by we got faster and faster. Everyone had a bit of a Vulcan mind-meld, so it makes it very easy to work together. But we challenge the material. If you have an idea, it's not going to get through easily. It's going to require some debate-club skills to push your idea through.

Any specific examples?

Joe Russo: There was probably some debate regarding the most famous moment, I think, of all the Marvel films, which is the portals opening at the end of *Avengers: Endgame*. The original concept was that the camera rotated around Steve Rogers and everybody was collected behind him. It didn't have these individual entrances for the characters, and that actually was a big debate. I remember fighting that one for months in the edit room. I'm not going to say who was on what side, but that was a grinder. I remember Anth and I going, "Fuck it, we're going to shoot it during reshoots."

McFeely: Yeah, I'll go under the bus because I wasn't alone. I thought the first cut worked pretty well. I thought it was cool. But Joe is right because Joe has ten per cent P.T. Barnum, right? One of the lessons I've learned over the course of working with these guys and working with Marvel is emotional-logic trumps logic-logic. It's not a cop-out. It's what the movie wants. It's what your audience wants.

Anthony Russo: What you see in this conversation is the level of the collaboration we have together. We've been very involved in their process as writers, they've been very involved in our process, to the point where we're all collectively invested in the edit together, figuring out what version of the movie that becomes. That's been the great joy of this foursome.

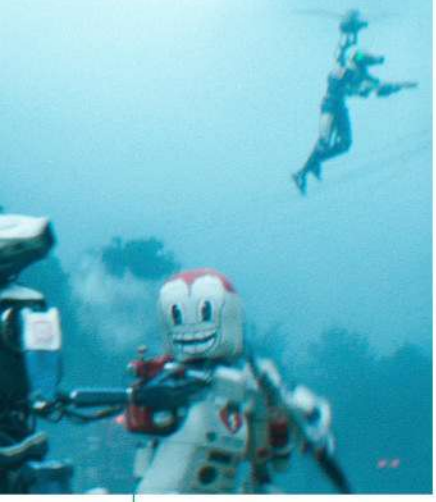
Can you shout and scream at each other? Can you swear at each other and call each other unspeakable names?

McFeely: There's usually one shouting session per movie. And it's notable. You go, "Oh, that got shouty, I don't like that." But it's not that common.

Markus: Everybody gets tense, everybody gets tired. I've had fights with my wife, we're still married. Conversely, the more pissed off you get, it's almost an indicator that you oughta shut up. The logical part doesn't have the wheel anymore. "No, I'm gonna fight and I'm gonna fuck you up!" That's not really the job. Winning is not the job.

In terms of going from Marvel to AGBO, when you went into *Endgame*, were you already making plans to migrate to AGBO? Did you know it was going to be your endgame?

Anthony Russo: We did, just because that was what the story was. Whatever happened after that movie, we had no idea. We were leaving it all on the table in that film. We were thinking there wasn't a road forward for us beyond *Endgame* in Marvel, at least an immediate road.



Clockwise from main: Robot wars; Michelle and Keats ready for combat; Robots swarm through a fairground; Iron Man (Robert Downey Jr) in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019); He is inevitable: Thanos (Josh Brolin) in *Infinity War*; Sebastian Stan in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014).

And you brought Chris and Steve across to AGBO as well. You all left en masse.
McFeely: Like graduation, making off with office supplies.

It was a freeze frame, like the end of *The Breakfast Club*.
McFeely: It was more like the end of *Butch And Sundance*, really.
Markus: I never looked at it as leaving Marvel. We were effectively telling the Steve Rogers story from soup to nuts, and it was done. One of the ways great things get done is shorthand between people who've worked together a lot. If you're constantly having to go, "Okay, let's meet the new people, or the new director", you lose a lot of time. So even on that level, it was like, "This could be a very healthy incubator for things that might otherwise get killed out in the world too soon."
Anthony Russo: That was exactly what happened on *The Electric State*. Chris found this amazing graphic novel, and he basically gave it to Steve, and to Joe and I, and he said, "I think there's something there." That's very different from going into a room like Chris was describing, with people you don't know, and starting from scratch.

So you have the graphic novel. But you have to put a lot of meat on the bones when you're writing the screenplay for *The Electric State*. In fact, sometimes you had to come up with the bones as well. How did you do that?
McFeely: Slowly, over time. Chris found that [book] in '17/'18, when we were in Atlanta, making the *Avengers* movies. It's been a long process, but it's like we've always done it. It starts with Chris and I in a room, blue-skying it, and then we bring Joe and Anth in and go, "Alright, here's the direction we're headed." And they go, "Maybe this direction...?" I've learned by stepping away from Marvel and going to AGBO that it takes a while to get stuff made. I've done really well, but it used to be, I'd sign on to a job and I knew when that movie was coming out, right? That's not how it works in the real world. You've gotta bake these things and convince people to eat them.
Markus: When you read *The Electric State*, Simon [Stålenhag, author] leaves an enormous amount to your imagination and there is an implication of a vast amount of story that he's not being completely specific about. So the process we went through from draft to draft was narrowing down the kind of story within this world that we wanted to tell. We wrote a very dark draft and some lighter drafts, but they didn't cancel each other out. In fact, writing the lighter draft, knowing the darkness was out there, it feels deeper, richer, and it's a matter of implying that those things are there. That was kind of like what we did with Marvel, hunting out the tone without necessarily going, "This is the whole thing."

The tone of the movie is fascinating. There's a lot of the Marvel scope in there, but also this Spielbergian Amblin emotion, and you're narrowing in on this very intimate story about a girl trying to find her brother.
Joe Russo: When you're working on a new story of this scale, and this many new characters in a new world, your tone is the most significant part of it. It's also the hardest part of it. The four of us like to experiment with tone, and that becomes a very long journey. We've been working on this project for almost seven years and a lot of it was tonal discovery, because there are very dark elements in it. There are very absurd elements in it. It's at times approachable, and at times totally nuts. We love all of that. It creates this really weird stew of retro-futurism, and very present-tense thematics. I feel like we wound up somewhere very fresh tonally, but [it] still has the ability to be watched by a family, which is a critical part of the mission on the movie. There just isn't a lot of storytelling right now where an eight-year-old could watch it with an 80-year-old and both be impacted by the movie.

It would be remiss not to ask about what you're doing next. You're returning to Marvel, or at least, three of you are. What can you say in terms of how the return to the *Avengers* movies came about?
(*Long pause*)
McFeely: Nobody wants to tackle that!
Markus: Let's tackle the elephant in the room. Part of the joy of having this company is being able to get projects up on their feet. So, while we've been doing these other things and writing other scripts and doing *Electric State*, AGBO optioned, at my urging, two series of books and I sincerely made great promises to the authors and the estates that these would be well taken care of. I can't let them go unattended; they will die. That's why I'm not in that room with Chris.
Anthony Russo: I think it goes back to what we were talking about earlier. *Endgame* was the end, and it took a little time for us to begin to think about it as something other than an end. We're very close with Kevin and Lou [D'Esposito, Marvel Studios' Co-President] and the entire Marvel team and we've had conversations through the years. We've talked about a lot of ideas. Really what happened was, we ended up stumbling upon an idea that activated all of us. You couldn't see it coming until it came, and once it came it was like, "Well, that's a story we need to tell."
Joe Russo: There were ideas that we were trying to wrap our heads around that preceded this one, and we just never found the story. I remember calling Steve and said, "Hey, crazy idea. What do you think if we all go back and do *Secret Wars*?" Do you remember what you said?
McFeely: It was probably something despairing, I'm sure.
Joe Russo: You were like, "Fuck no. Absolutely not." And then you hung up. And the next morning at 7.30 you called and were like, "Alright, I have an idea."
McFeely: Blame me!

Well, it's going to be fascinating seeing how that pans out as a trio. When Bill Berry quit R.E.M., Michael Stipe said, "We're a three-legged dog. A three-legged dog is still a dog; it just has to learn how to run differently."
Anthony Russo: Thanks for being so poignant with that.
Markus: Bill Berry left the music industry. I'm still a fully operational dog-leg.
McFeely: Just hopping around.

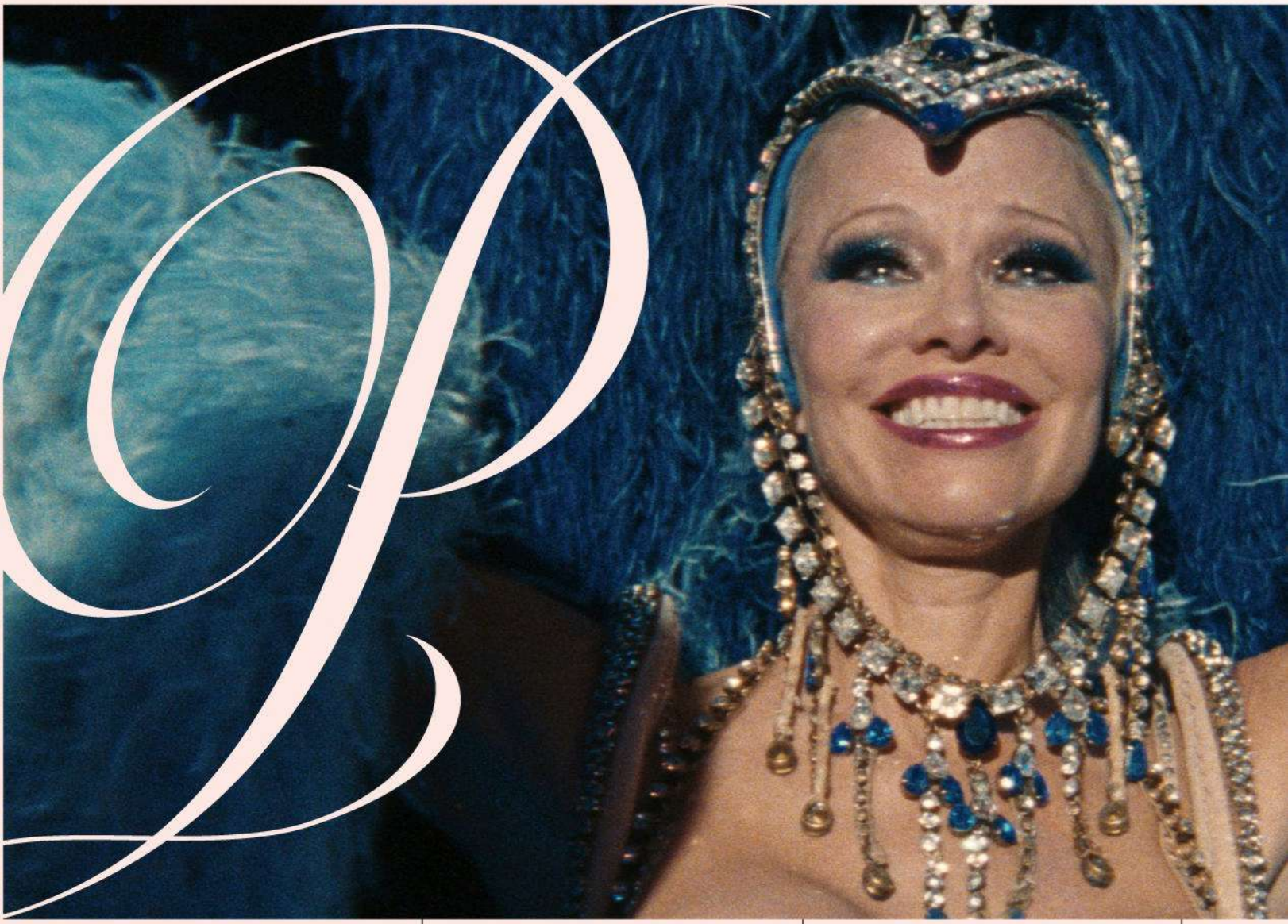
***THE ELECTRIC STATE* IS ON NETFLIX FROM 14 MARCH**

Getty Images, Marvel

Beyond the Lights

IN *THE LAST SHOWGIRL*, PAMELA ANDERSON GETS THE ROLE OF A LIFETIME AS A VEGAS DANCER TRYING TO SURVIVE THE END OF AN ERA. WE SPEAK TO HER AND DIRECTOR GIA COPPOLA ABOUT SECOND CHANCES… AND THE REALITY OF THE RAZZLE-DAZZLE

WORDS **HAYLEY CAMPBELL**



PAMELA ANDERSON IS EXCITED. She has never been this excited about a role in her life. An hour ago she was stuck in traffic, and to avoid being late for her interview with *Empire* she leapt out of the cab and marched across London to make it in time. This new film is different from anything she has done before and she's desperate to talk about it — though she does pause briefly to make the hotel waiter giggle (he was carrying an impressive amount on one arm). "I feel like I've been keeping this secret that I was capable of more," she says, beaming. She's even dressed in a cream jumper woven through with glittering silver thread in homage to her character.

In *The Last Showgirl*, Anderson plays Shelly, a 57-year-old Las Vegas dancer whose once celebrated show is closing due to dwindling ticket sales. She is a woman hailed as beautiful and worshipped like a movie star, back when this kind of spectacle was what the city was built on. It's a show that Shelly devoted her whole life to — it is the root of her grown daughter's (Billie Lourd) bitterness, feeling she always came second — and now it's ending. The film is an existential reckoning in 85 minutes, set in the everyday reality that holds up a world of rhinestones and feathers.

We're far from the Las Vegas strip now, sitting in the library of the Covent Garden Hotel, and Anderson is bare-faced and luminous in the winter sunlight. She seems kind of stunned that her new stripped-back, make-up-free look gets so much press — but in the kind of resigned way of a woman whose entire life gets so much press. "It's so funny, because I didn't do it for any other reason than just that I'm in the process of remembering who I am, and wanting to be as *me* as possible — instead of a caricature of myself, which I felt like I've done in the past." But it is quietly revolutionary for someone as famous as Pamela Anderson to finally show us who she really is: a woman who, when *The Last Showgirl* landed in her life, was living on the plot of land in Canada where she grew up, making pickles in her garden, thinking her career was over, having never had a chance to show us what she could really do.

"I thought I blew it," she says.

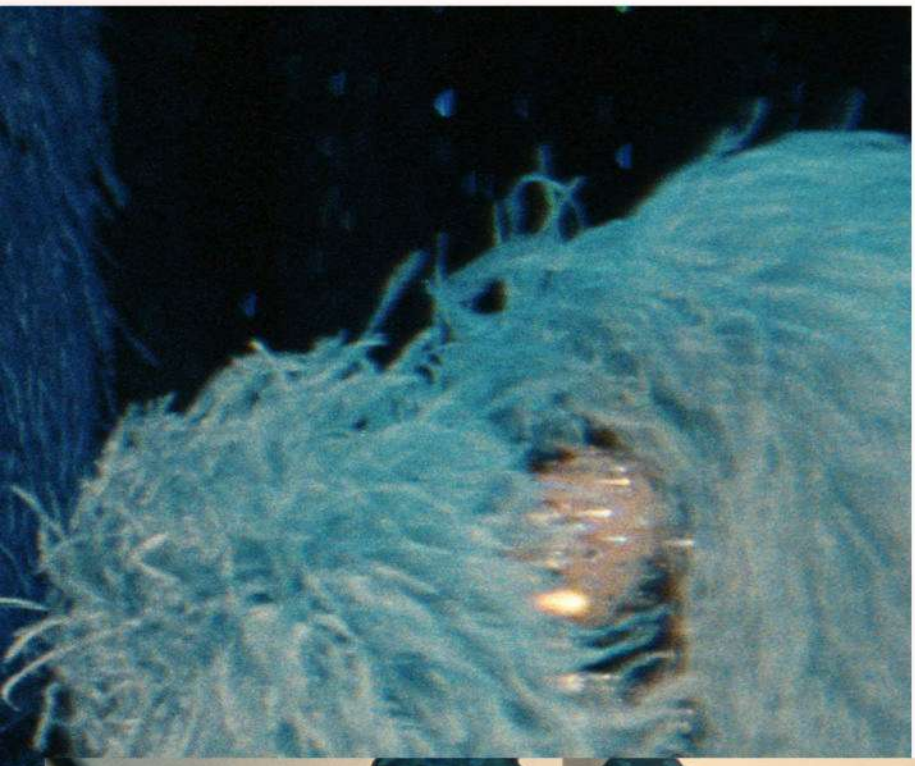
It turns out she was right where she needed to be.

GIA COPPOLA, DIRECTOR OF *PALO ALTO*

and *Mainstream*, knew there was only one person who could play this role. "It was this kind of cosmic, instinctual feeling," she says. In early 2023, she saw a recent photo of Anderson, who was at that point promoting her Netflix documentary, *Pamela: A Love Story*. Coppola didn't know much about Anderson as a person until she watched the documentary, in which she tells the story of her whole life, in her own house, flipping through diaries and photos. "I saw this woman who was so raw," says Coppola. "She was just really honest and unafraid, and spoke really authentically and honestly and vulnerably. If you're looking for an actor, that's the best thing you can ask for."

In the documentary, Anderson is relaxed and funny — even when talking about the things that have hurt her the most. In the '90s, her career was derailed by life, men, and stolen home-videos marketed across the world as a sex tape. She became the butt of too many tired Jay Leno jokes, and her film and TV roles were soon limited to parodies of herself before they all but disappeared. She was a woman once worshipped and sexualised, then largely discarded.

"Obviously I could see character similarities with Shelly and Pamela, their mode for a kind of optimism," says Coppola. Anderson, always with the gardening metaphors, has always believed that lemonade should be made from lemons. She



Clockwise from main: A star performer: Shelly (Pamela Anderson) takes the stage; A moment of reflection; Floor manager Eddie (Dave Bautista); Creating the dream alongside troupe member Jodie (Kiernan Shipka); Best friend Annette (Jamie Lee Curtis).

went on the talk shows, endured the jokes, and then spun it around to talk about what she really cared about: animal rights. She was a vegan long before that was a thing in Hollywood, and has recently published a vegan cookbook. However, says Coppola, "I saw enough dissimilarities that it would be intriguing for her as an actress. And I saw that she was hungry and exuding a need to express herself creatively." At the end of the documentary, Anderson finds new life on the stage — singing and dancing as Roxie Hart in *Chicago* in 2022 — and says, as the run on Broadway ends and she heads back to her garden, that she is restless. She didn't realise then that Roxie was her warm-up for Shelly.

Anderson has always had an ambition that didn't fit with her circumstance. "I didn't want to just do *Baywatch*," she says of the globally successful lifeguard drama that instantly shot her to fame in 1992. "I took my career very seriously right from the very beginning. I mean, I didn't know what that meant. I didn't know how to get from where I was to where I wanted to be." In the late '80s and then 1990s, when she was doing photoshoots for *Playboy*, she would sit on the floor of theatrical bookshops reading Tennessee Williams, Sam Shepard and Eugene O'Neill plays. She also loved films — really loved films — naming Jean-Luc Godard and John Cassavetes as her favourite filmmakers, and Gena Rowlands as her favourite actress. Even now, she is buzzing that she was invited to visit the Criterion Closet two weeks ago. (Her picks were *3 Films By Roberto Rossellini Starring Ingrid Bergman*, then Barbara Loden's *Wanda*, *The Koker Trilogy*, and *Love Streams* with Cassavetes and Rowlands. "She is such a lover of arthouse, classical cinema, and she can really put a lot of people to shame with her knowledge," says Coppola. "She trumps me sometimes.") "I wouldn't consider myself a contemporary-style actress," says Anderson. "I love those scenes dripping with a lot of emotion and personal experience. Marilyn Monroe was, I think, an underrated actress." In the dark of the cinema, Anderson was thinking, "How do I get *there* from here?"

In the early '90s she took acting classes with Ivana Chubbuck, who has coached Academy Award winners, but she ended up getting famous and sidetracked instead. "Life just took a different turn. I didn't have to apply myself to anything. I was working on the beach, I had my dogs, had my kids, got married, and then my personal life became such tabloid fodder that it was a big distraction." She shrugs. In *The Last Showgirl*, Anderson saw a second chance: she could turn this experience into art. All of this was just fertiliser. "I feel like my entire life is in this role," she says, with an intensity that reveals she truly means it. But before she knew the film existed, her own agent rejected it within an hour of receiving the email. ›

"It was in record time, that rejection. Like, to the point where it was just kind of comical," Coppola laughs. "Okay, we're a small independent movie, sure. But [Anderson] obviously didn't get a chance to read it! So I had to find another route to get to her because I really couldn't take no for an answer. It could only be her." Coppola noticed that Anderson's son Brandon was an executive producer on the documentary, and got in touch with him. "He really vetted me. He read the script, and he looked over my work, and he was *really* protective of her — and rightly so. I promised I was going to take good care of her."

"I'm a lucky mum," Anderson says, smiling. "I feel like my boys have really masterminded this for me. That's why Brandon produced the documentary: he said, 'I want the world to know my mum the way she is.' No-one really believed in me enough to think that I was capable of this."

No-one, maybe, except for Gia Coppola. When she and Anderson finally met, they were both desperately trying to sell themselves to each other, not knowing that each of them was already sold. "It's such a funny conversation, looking back on it," says Coppola. For Anderson, it was bigger than that. "I thought, 'This is life or death. This is what I've been waiting for.'" Now she had the opportunity, she wasn't going to let it go. "I was going to work really hard and have her be this kind of ethereal, magical character, the kind [of character] that takes a tremendous amount of work and introspection and focus and commitment to carry through. This was an experiment with myself," she says. "I wanted to see what I was made of."

IN *THE LAST SHOWGIRL*, IT'S THE REALITY behind the illusion that anchors this story. It's the ripped costumes, the stink of hairspray and glitter, the banal babble about dinner plans in the seconds before the curtain goes up (something Anderson experienced on *Chicago* and brought with her to this film, along with the choreographer). It's about the grit it takes to make magic happen on a stage, and the struggle to live a human life outside of a showgirl one. Coppola drew inspiration from documentaries, photography, and journalists who wrote about the city (like Dave Hickey). But there was also a moment, years ago, when a friend was pickpocketed in a casino and police escorted them through the back corridors; Coppola saw a poster for 'Employee Of The Month' and has never forgotten it. "It feels like such a metaphor for America in a lot of ways," she says. "It's this glittery, interesting façade, but who are the people that make it work?" She and Anderson talk about Las Vegas like it's an alien landscape in the desert, but for both it comes down to the real people that work there, whether unseen or on stage, who were all part of this film whether they knew it or not.

They shot the film in 18 days, in real locations. The backstage scenes were shot in the hours when a water circus (an aquatic-based dance show) wasn't performing; by 4pm, the crew had to replace all of the dressing-room personal belongings that they had temporarily relocated. "And soggy towels," says Anderson, laughing. "It smelled like soggy towels." Real dancers joined them for the shoot (borrowed from Dita Von Teese's show, which was on holiday hiatus) and older, former dancers from the *Jubilee!* revue show spoke to Anderson about their lives. The *Jubilee*!, which ran from 1981 at the MGM Grand Hotel until its closure in 2016, had inspired Kate Gersten to write the play on which she based her screenplay, after seeing a show with 85 women on stage, 45 crew members, and just 15 people in the audience. Anderson and the cast even wore the real *Jubilee!* costumes — Bob Mackie museum pieces that haven't left the building

Zoey Grossman

Clockwise from main: Shelly comforts fellow showgirls Jodie and Mary-Anne (Brenda Song); Director Gia Coppola, right, with DP Autumn Durald Arkapaw; Shelly's daughter Hannah (Billie Lourd); The pain behind the paint; Mary-Anne backstage.

in 30 years. "They still had name tags in them," she says, wide-eyed. "I felt like I was carrying so many women who had worn them before." A heavy load, both metaphorical and not: some of these pieces weigh 30kg, so you can only wear them for so long. The dancers taught Anderson how to quickly change into the costumes, how to walk down stairs in them, and the dos and don'ts of being a showgirl (no mingling with the civilians on the casino floor; in their heyday, showgirls were distant, godlike attractions).

They also told her what it was like to be on stage, how it felt to be phased out. But in a way, Anderson already knew — it was far more than just taking away Shelly's job; it was about what the stage could do for your heart. "I'm a very shy person," she says. "I did *Playboy* because I was so shy, and I wanted to get over my shyness. It was paralysing. I think Shelly felt powerful on stage. She felt seen and beautiful, and that's where she felt safest, on stage. That resonated with me."

Shelly's best friend in the film is played by a deeply fake-tanned Jamie Lee Curtis (who got her third spray-tan shortly before the first cast read-through and sat across the table from Anderson as it developed. "She was just getting oranger and oranger," cackles Anderson). She plays a cocktail waitress in the casino, and in one of her most memorable scenes, she dances on a table to Bonnie Tyler's 'Total Eclipse Of The Heart'. This, too, was drawn from life, and wasn't in the script. Curtis had watched the real staff doing their thing, and found herself awestruck and inspired at 6am on a desolate casino floor.

"I just love that this movie is about working-class Vegas," says Anderson, who got her nails done locally just for a chance to have a chat. "It's about what makes Vegas sparkle, and who's holding up the rhinestones. I always think every woman has a story. Every woman has a movie. And I think Las Vegas is such an interesting character itself. Out with the old and in with the new. You can demolish a building and put up the Sphere, but you can't demolish a person."

WHEN *EMPIRE* ASKS HOW ALL OF THIS compares to her previous film experiences, like 1996's black-latex-clad bounty-hunter debacle *Barb Wire*, Anderson makes a noise a bit like a bark. "Well, I didn't have a husband running his Testarossa into my make-up trailer or punching the producer out, so that was a pleasure!" she laughs. "I thought [*Barb Wire*] was a great opportunity to do something fun, but when we got to Cannes, it got so much attention. They changed the director. They changed the script multiple times. They changed everything." She sighs. "I don't even know what that movie's about at this point."

The Last Showgirl is a different story altogether, and a new era for both its main character and its lead actor. It's a hopeful film about second chances, and if there is a message underneath it all, Coppola thinks it is about our culture's eagerness to discard when, in time, things and people only get more interesting. For Anderson, this feels like the true beginning of her career. "Really, the rest of it was just boot camp," she says. "I had this wonderful, messy, wild life to draw from, and I could never have played Shelly if I didn't have that life."

The Last Showgirl moves her story on. "I think I'm always reinventing myself," she says. "I like to call it playing characters. But in this chapter, I really wanted to go back into my childhood, almost, and go, 'Who am I? Who was I meant to be?' When I did Broadway, the only picture I had on my mirror was a picture of me at four years old, before life happened. And I said, 'I just need to get out of the way. I'm gonna let her do it.' And so I did it for her. And I feel like this film, too, is about that. I want this to be my legacy. I don't want what's happened to me to define me. I want what I *do* to define me."

She has a new agent now. And last month, her performance as Shelly got her a Golden Globe nomination. She's excited about what comes next which, really, could be anything. "I want to do theatre. I want to do *musical* theatre. I want to come to the West End. I want to go on Broadway again." She pauses, almost breathless with the possibilities. "And I want to make my pickles and my jam!"

THE LAST SHOWGIRL IS IN CINEMAS FROM 28 FEBRUARY

BACK IN ACTION

WORDS
NICK DE SEMLYEN

ART STREIBER

IT'S THE FEEL-GOOD STORY OF THE DECADE — A FORMER CHILD STAR BACK ON TOP, AFTER YEARS IN THE WILDERNESS. WITH AN OSCAR UNDER HIS BELT AND HIS FIRST HOLLYWOOD LEAD ROLE INCOMING, IT'S TIME FOR KE HUY QUAN TO *REALLY* FLEX HIS MUSCLES

Ke Huy Quan, photographed exclusively for *Empire* in Los Angeles on 11 November 2024.

KE HUY QUAN IS IN THE EYE OF THE STORM.

He's been here before, of course. When he was barely a teenager, he was a global icon — we all grew up gasping at his adventures, from battling Thuggees in a cave system lousy with voodoo in *Indiana Jones And The Temple Of Doom*, to being menaced by Robert Davi and Joey Pants in *The Goonies*. Those blockbusters put him on the map. But after decades of quiet, during which a retired-from-acting Quan suspected that his Hollywood journey had stopped for good, that storm is whirling again, fiercer than ever.

As an adult actor, he's won an Oscar for his comeback role(s) as Waymond in mind-melting multiverse romance *Everything Everywhere All At Once*. He's met and taken photos with seemingly every celebrity in Hollywood, including, recently, both Billy Crystal and Mickey Mouse simultaneously. He's joined the MCU with *Loki*, played a pangolin in *Kung Fu Panda 4*. Good things keep happening to him.

And it seems like the whole world is cheering him on. When *Empire* sits down with the immensely likeable star at a seafood restaurant in Calabasas, Los Angeles, for a lunch of oysters and octopus (it's hard not to think of the moment at the end of *The Goonies* where Quan's Data says, "The octopus was really scary!", despite the scene with the beast having been left on the cutting-room floor), he's preparing to fly to Taiwan to present at the Golden Horse Awards, Asia's equivalent of the Oscars. Finally, he's accepted everywhere, all at once. And, now in his fifties, he wants to do everything, preparing to fulfil some long-harboured dreams.

The first: to star in a high-octane Hollywood action flick. The forthcoming *Love Hurts*, his first leading role in America, is the culmination of decades of action training by Quan. Directed by *John Wick* stunt-maestro Jonathan Eusebio, it has been an experience that, yes, hurt — but was worth every bruise. Quan is making up for lost time, and a little pain isn't going to slow him down.

It's almost two years on from your Oscar win. Does it feel like life has totally changed?
On a personal level, nothing's changed. I still live in the same house. I still drive the same car. I still go to the same places. I don't have an assistant. My wife, Echo, helps me. But on a professional level, oh, it's night and day. I spent so many years desperately trying to persuade filmmakers that I'm right for a role: "Please put me in this movie." But now, filmmakers are coming to me. They'll say, "We have this script. We think you're perfect for this." That's how *Love Hurts* started.

Incredibly, given you've been acting since you were 12, this is your first leading-man role in a Hollywood movie.
I actually passed [on *Love Hurts*] a couple of times, because when I read it, I thought, "Wait, this is not for me. Why are you asking me?" I was so confused. I thought it was written for somebody like Jason Statham, because I've been conditioned to think that when you have an action star, he needs to look like The Rock or Stallone or Schwarzenegger. I didn't think anybody that looks like me could star in this role. Luckily, they didn't give up on me. They came back for a third time. I was at an event with Steven Spielberg and he was asking me, "Ke, how are you doing?" I said, "Steven, I'm not doing so well." Because of all the love and support that I had gotten during that whole award season, I was so worried that whatever I was going to do next, I would disappoint. So I was having trouble picking my next project. Steven was very generous. He said, "Ke, let's have lunch." And I told him about this project and kind of pitched it to him. He said, "Ke, it's great. Do it." I went in and they had these really elaborate slides with me as the main character. That's when I started to see it a different way. "Oh, they're trying to create a different kind of action hero. Not the type that we've seen for decades, but something new."

Talking of Spielberg, your first-ever movie — and your first taste of action — was *Temple Of Doom*.
It was my first exposure to action. For the big finale (*in which Quan's Short Round tussles with a voodoo-doll-tormenting child*), I was trained for a couple of days with a taekwondo instructor. I still remember his name — Philip Tan. That was my first time doing it on camera, and I loved it.

You were also taught to swim by Harrison Ford. Was he a patient teacher?
He's a great teacher. And to this day I know how to swim because of him. I mean, I'm not as good as him. (*Laughs*) He has great forms, but I can only do a couple of styles.

You then got yourself a black belt.
After *Indiana Jones*, I came back to LA, and my brother and I immediately went and studied. We would go to taekwondo classes Monday, Wednesday and Friday. And then on Tuesday and Thursday, we would watch Hong Kong movies. I even went and bought a sandbag and put it in my backyard: we would go to the television and rewind the sequences that we loved, watch them again and then go out and try to do those moves. I really wanted to go and make action movies. I fantasised about working with Jackie Chan or Sammo Hung and then also in Hollywood. Unfortunately, nobody hired me. And I made two movies that I really love, but they were low-budget, independent action movies that nobody really saw.

Those are the Chinese films *Breathing Fire* (1991) and *Red Pirate* (1997). In the latter, you play the hero, an ass-kicking cop who at one point slides down a bannister with two guns. It feels like a hybrid of Jackie Chan and John Woo.
Oh yes, that slide was Chow Yun-Fat in *A Better Tomorrow*. Classic! With *Red Pirate*, that director (*Chen Chi-Hwa*) was Jackie Chan's director. He collaborated with Jackie Chan on many movies. So I was super-excited and ›

Previous page: Suit: Paul Smith; Shirt: Eton; Shoes: Grenson; Glasses: Oliver Peoples; Watch: Omega.
This page: Suit: Paul Smith; Shirt: Percival; Bandana: Levi's; Watch: IWC; Ring: Kimitake; Glasses: Oliver Peoples

"I DON'T KNOW HOW TO DO FIGHT SCENES ANY OTHER WAY, EXCEPT TO GO FULL POWER."

I poured everything I knew into that movie. I did all the fights myself, all the falling, all the twirling around, jumping. I had bruises every day, but I didn't mind. I was really happy because I was living my dream.

Yet it was shortly after that movie that you walked away from acting.
That was actually the last movie I ever did before stepping away. I was disappointed, because I had a great time and worked really hard, but it didn't do anything. Nobody really talked about it. I did a few movies in Asia, and a 40-episode TV series, but they never became big hits. It was a tough period, because when I went back to Asia [after *Indiana Jones* and *The Goonies*], I was treated like a big movie star. You know, there would be fans waiting for me at the hotel I was staying in, and at the studio where we were working. But that never turned into a meaningful career. So when that dried up, I came back [to America]... and then it was even worse!

You've spoken about making the decision to quit acting after auditioning for a role with only two lines, and then not getting it.
That was after I finished *Red Pirate*, where I was the star. I came back to Hollywood and my agent said, "Well, we don't have much, but we want to keep you working. There's this role that only has two lines. It's a Vietcong role. You want to go try out for it?" And when I couldn't even get that, that was one of the lowest points of my life.

You were really going through it. But then you picked yourself up and applied to USC film school. Did you have a grand plan of where it would lead to?
No, not yet, because I was really lost at that time. And stepping away was the hardest decision I've ever had to make. I was just like, "Let me learn as much as I can about the movie business." Every department — producing, script-writing, cinematography, editing, sound — I tried to learn something about it. So hopefully, when I came out, I would have a career behind the camera.

You made a comedy-horror short called *Voodoo*, which is still shown to students there.
I edited and did the cinematography for that. I'm very proud of it. It was one of those classes where you partner up with a classmate. We shot it on film, 8mm, and we would splice the film on this tiny machine. And I would have all these different takes taped to the wall. I was in a good place, because I was surrounded by people that were just as passionate about movies as I am.

Funnily enough, like *Temple Of Doom*, it has a voodoo-doll theme.
That wasn't my idea. It was my partner [Gregg Bishop] who directed the movie. But we all grew up watching the same movies, and he was heavily influenced by Spielberg and the *Indiana Jones* films.

Then everything started spinning in a whole new direction. You started working on action sequences from behind the camera.
I had known [legendary action choreographer and director] Corey Yuen many years prior to that. He's very good friends with my cousin up in Seattle, so every time I went to Seattle I would see him, and he would ask, "Ke, what have you been up to?" When he found out that I had graduated, it was just perfect timing. He calls and says, "I'm in Toronto. Why don't you fly up?" I literally had no clue what was going on. I landed and a driver took me to set. I walked on set and said, "What movie is this?" And then I found out that it was [2000's] *X-Men*.

You were just thrown into it like that?
I was thrown into it. I had zero experience of action choreography. Corey took me under his wing and taught me. And because of my taekwondo background, I was tasked with training Hugh Jackman all the moves for the big finale. It was a great fight. After we designed it, me and another action choreographer would walk out the fight in front of the entire cast and crew. Over 100 people. And a young man named Kevin Feige was off to the side talking to the producer, saying, "That guy over there is Short Round from *Indiana Jones*!" (*Laughs*) He couldn't believe it. And that was my first job, right out of college.

You went on to work with Wong Kar Wai on films like *2046*. With all that experience behind the camera, did you ever get the itch to direct yourself?
Oh yes. I thought about it, for sure. But you know, Spielberg always says, "Listen to your intuition. It never shouts, it whispers." And something was telling me that that's not what I should be doing at that time.

Now you're where you're at, is that itch coming back?
Right now, my main focus is to be a part of as many interesting projects as I can as an actor.I want to play characters that I didn't get the opportunity to do when I was younger. Directing is something that I think is a little bit further down the line, because it's very time-consuming. And there are so many different characters I want to play. So many wonderful filmmakers I want to work with.

Let's talk about some of your upcoming roles. *Everything Everywhere*... saw you bust some martial-arts moves, including with a weaponised fanny-pack. But Marvin Gable in *Love Hurts*, estate agent and secret one-man army, is on another level.
They tailored [that role] to me, to everything that I know. We have an incredible action team. And [producer] David Leitch and his company, 87North, are very good with this genre. Going into this movie, I was mentally prepared, and I was physically ready, because I trained with them for three months. And it was really trying to find out, while we were training, what I can still do. Mentally, I think I can do everything, but a lot of those moves ›

Top to bottom: In martial-arts actioner *Breathing Fire* (1991); More hi-jinks as Data alongside Mikey (Sean Astin) and Mouth (Corey Feldman) in *The Goonies* (1985); Short Round with Dr Jones/Indy (Harrison Ford) in *Indiana Jones And The Temple Of Doom* (1984).

Tuxedo: Zegna; Shirt: Eton; Shoes: Grenson; Watch: Omega; Glasses: Oliver Peoples; Socks: London Sock Company

Styling: Chloe Takayanagi at The Wall Group.
Grooming: Mira Chai using House Of Skuff.
Props: Anthony Altomare.

I haven't done in decades. One of the things I'm very proud of is I did all the fights myself. There were stunt doubles for the wire rigs where I get thrown across the room. But all the punches, all the kicks, I threw myself. Every day, I would soak in a salt bath for half an hour. It was a lot of fun, but it was physically so demanding that halfway through the shoot, I told my wife, "I don't think I can do this again." Then, when the trailer came out and I saw how great it is, I told her, "I can't wait to do this again." (*Laughs*)

Is there one show-stopping sequence you were especially excited about, going in?
There are five big action sequences, each one very different, and I was very involved. One of the fights I'm very proud of is the big finale, the epic fight between Daniel Wu and I. We really went at it. That's the way I know. I don't know how to do fight scenes any other way, except to go full power.

Is it surreal to suddenly be the main selling point for the film, after all this time?
It's incredible. I never thought I would one day see a trailer with the Universal Studios logo before it, and then the movie be advertised with my name. Honestly, everything that has happened in the last two years, I never thought would happen. It feels great. But also, stepping into this movie, I knew what being number one meant, because I've seen it. I've seen how Tom Hiddleston does it [on *Loki*, which co-stars Quan]. I've seen how Harrison Ford does it. You really set the tone. Everybody looks to you. I went in thinking, "Okay, now I'm in this position, how

Top to bottom: With Lio Tipton and Mustafa Shakir in *Love Hurts*; Hello, Oscar! As Waymond Wang in *Everything Everywhere All At Once* (2022); TVA chief engineer OB in *Loki* (2021-'23), with Loki (Tom Hiddleston) and Mobius (Owen Wilson); In the upcoming *The Electric State*.

Jacket and trousers: Todd Snyder; Sweater: COS; Glasses: Oliver Peoples; Watch: Omega; Boots: Dr. Martens. Additional imagery: A24, Disney, Netflix, Universal, Warner Bros.

am I going to treat my cast and crew?" And I hope they're happy.

Then there's *The Electric State*, in which you play some manner of genius scientist.
I play Dr Amherst. A character that Millie Bobby Brown and Chris Pratt traverse America to look for. They need to find this doctor to understand what's going on.

With that and *Loki*'s Ouroboros, you're becoming Hollywood's go-to guy for dispensing information.
Yeah, isn't that something? (*Laughs*) I spent my entire life searching for info, and now people are coming to *me* for info. [*The Electric State*] was a very different experience because there were a lot of mocap actors. We would rehearse with the mocap actors, shoot a couple of takes with them, then they would step aside and now we're just acting as if to nothing. It was a real first. *Loki*, everything was practical — except the Temporal Loom, which we had a giant poster of so we knew what we were looking at.

And then there's *Fairytale In New York*, to be directed by *Sisu*'s Jalmari Helander, which hasn't started shooting yet.
I was pitched *Fairytale* before I won the Oscar. It's a Christmas movie, it's a badass action movie, and I fell in love with the pitch right away, Because I've always wanted my own Christmas movie, but an ass-kicking Christmas movie, kind of like *Die Hard*. We recently got the second draft, and I can tell you it is awesome. I'm a cab driver on Christmas Eve, something happens, and it's really like a man-on-a-mission-type movie. It's non-stop action. Once it takes off, it's a big rollercoaster ride.

So you're finally getting the action movies you always wanted.
Isn't that ironic? Like, nobody wanted to hire me to be in an action movie when I was in my twenties, when I was in the best shape of my life!

Do you think you have a lot of years of action in you still?
That is what I hope. I don't want to be perceived as an action star. I hope I'm perceived as an actor who does action well. So I'm going to take it one step at a time. The best part about being an actor is, you get to play a variety of different characters. I love Ouroboros because he's so different than Waymond, and Waymond is so different than Marvin Gable.

Finally, Tom Hiddleston wrote a tribute to you when you were picked as one of *Time*'s 100 Most Influential People of 2023. He said, "His positivity is the most profound kind of spiritual strength." That positivity is in the DNA of a lot of your characters, too. But would you be up for going against type and playing a bad guy?
I would *love* to play a bad guy. Like a Bond villain. Or the kind of thing Hugh Grant does in *Heretic*. I want to go out of my comfort zone and just play this diabolical, *really* bad guy. (*Laughs*) That would be a lot of fun.

LOVE HURTS IS IN CINEMAS FROM 7 FEBRUARY

WORDS **TOM ELLEN**

APE FEAR

HAVING FREAKED US THE HELL OUT WITH THE TERRIFYING *LONGLEGS*, DIRECTOR OSGOOD PERKINS IS BACK WITH SOMETHING MORE, WELL, PRIMAL. WE GO BANANAS AS HE AND HIS CAST BANG THE DRUM FOR HORROR COMEDY

THE MONKEY

"God forbid *The Monkey* is a hit," says Osgood Perkins, with a sigh. "I consider myself a decent dude, but if [I have] two hits in seven months then I don't know what choice I have except to turn into a total prick. I'll become *impossible*."

Perkins is joking — we're fairly sure — but his maths checks out. Back in July of last year, the director unleashed his occult thriller *Longlegs*, and the movie hit big. Powered by a gloriously unhinged performance from Nicolas Cage — as a Marc Bolan-loving, Satan-worshipping, foundation-overapplying killer — *Longlegs* garnered glittering reviews, and earned $127 million against a budget of less than $10 million, making it the highest-grossing independent film of 2024.

"I still haven't really registered it," Perkins says of the reaction. "The very nature of anything 'independent' means that it's not for everyone, so it was quite a shock. I remember telling our costume designer, 'If we can just end up as a Halloween costume, we've won. Because we'll have created something eternal, that connects with people.' And last Halloween I got screenshotted *a lot* of *Longlegs* costumes."

As both writer and director, Perkins has been crafting low-budget, critically acclaimed genre pieces for more than a decade now. But *Longlegs*' gargantuan success has propelled him into another realm. "Everything suddenly moves more easily now," he smiles, over Zoom from a café in Vancouver. "It changes your confidence level, and the confidence level of the people around you. To be in a cinema at those early [*Longlegs*] screenings, and hear 300 people all say, 'Oh fuck!' at the same time... It was very gratifying."

This February, seven months after his box-office-eating, Halloween-conquering, mass- "oh-fuck"-inducing mega-hit, Perkins is set to unveil his next movie. How, then, do you follow up one of the strangest, most nightmarish horror films to grace cinema screens in a long time?

Apparently, you make a heartfelt comedy about a toy monkey.

Anyone who has read Stephen King's *The Monkey* — a gloomy and gory short story released as part of his 1985 collection, *Skeleton Crew* — may be wondering how exactly its film adaptation has ended up in 'heartfelt comedy' territory. The original tale tracks a man convinced that his childhood simian plaything is a cursed object, responsible for the grisly deaths of everyone around him; it's certainly not overflowing with LOLs. The vast tonal shift from page to screen is easily explained, however. "I took liberties like a *motherfucker*," Perkins informs us.

King's story was initially optioned a few years back by James Wan's Atomic Monster production company — the stable responsible for recent horror heavy-hitters like *The Conjuring* franchise and *M3GAN* — and in 2022 (before he'd even finished writing *Longlegs*), Perkins was approached about directing. "They [Atomic Monster] had a very serious script," Perkins recalls. "Very serious. I felt it was *too* serious, and I told them: 'This doesn't work for me.'" The way he made it work for him was to make it *about* him. "The thing with this toy monkey is that the people around it all die in insane ways," he notes. "So, I thought: 'Well, I'm an expert on that.' Both my parents died in insane, headline-making ways."

This is not hyperbole. Perkins' father, Anthony — the actor who played Norman Bates in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* — passed away from AIDS-related causes in 1992, having long hidden his contraction of the disease from the public. Nine years later, Perkins' mother — the actress and model Berry Berenson — perished as a passenger on the first plane to hit the World Trade Center on 11 September. "I spent a lot of my life recovering from tragedy, feeling quite bad," Perkins tells us. "It all seemed inherently unfair. You personalise the grief: 'Why is this happening to me?' But I'm older now and you realise this shit happens to everyone. Everyone dies. Sometimes in their sleep, sometimes in truly insane ways, like I experienced. But *everyone* dies. And I thought maybe the best way to approach that insane notion is with a smile."

The director promptly set about retooling King's story as an absurdist-yet-soulful comedy — retaining the bare bones of the original work (creepy toy monkey, supernatural vibes, a few character names) but changing pretty much everything else. "It ended up coming out of me quite easily," he says. His new script kicks off in 1999, centring on two 13-year-old twin brothers — Bill and Hal — whose airline-pilot father abandons them, leaving behind nothing but a cache of foreign tat. "Boomerangs, Mexican jumping beans, Bonsai trees, generic shit you bring back from other countries," laughs Perkins. "And among them is this monkey."

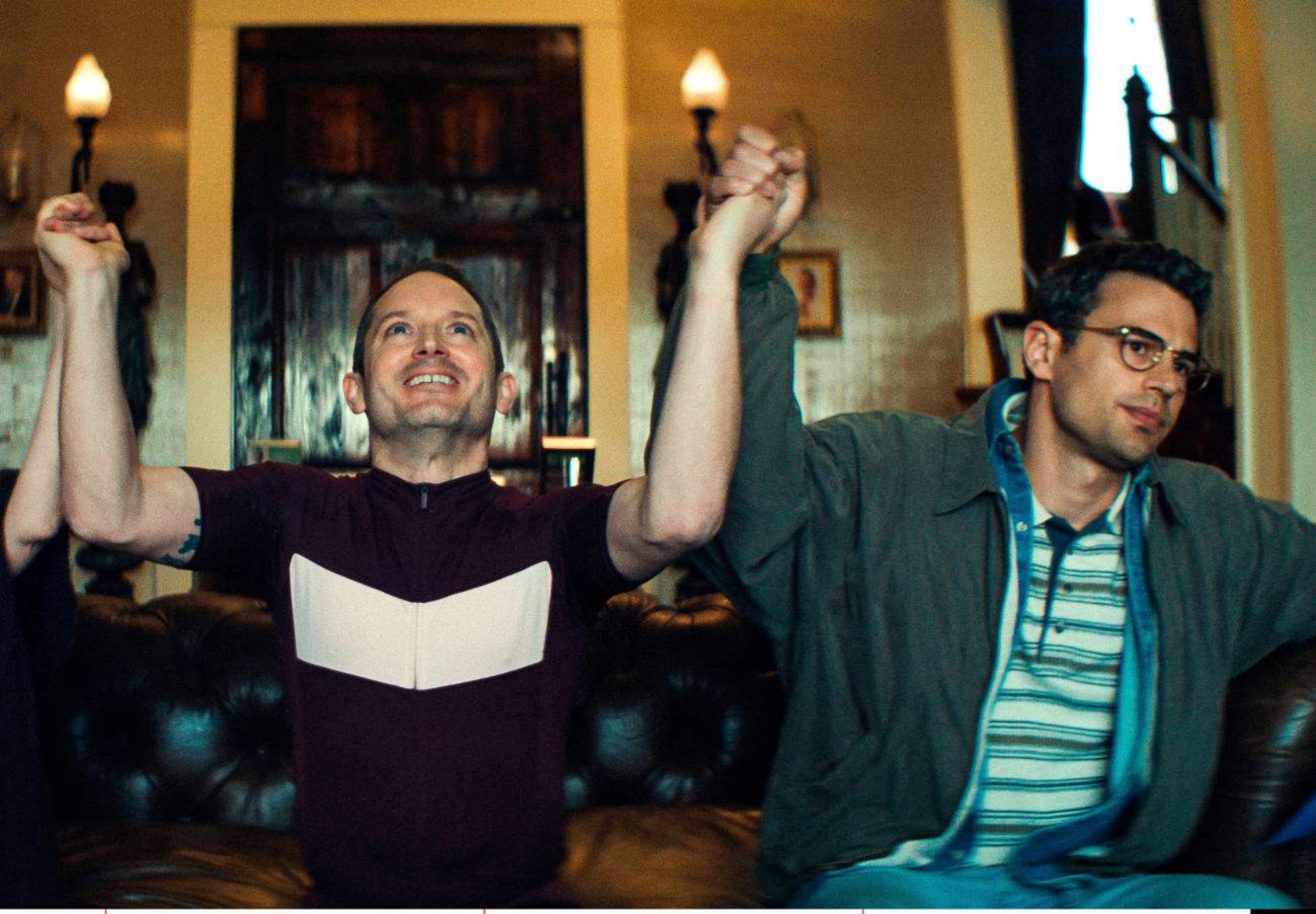
The boys soon discover that turning the monkey's key leads to people around them dying in bizarre and unexplained ways, and they wisely hurl it down a well. Twenty-four years later, though, the spooky toy resurfaces, setting the now-estranged adult twins on a collision course back towards one another, and cueing up what Perkins refers to as "*Itchy & Scratchy* levels" of blood. "The patron saints of this movie were Richard Donner, John Landis, Robert Zemeckis and [Looney Tunes animator] Chuck Jones," Perkins says. "[Zemeckis'] *Death Becomes Her* was a big [reference] — that kind of cartoonish horror splatter."

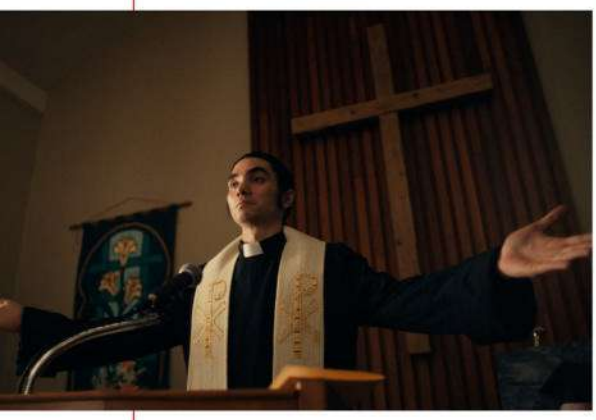
Happily, both Atomic Monster and Stephen King himself were on board with this tonal U-turn. "Stephen King had no notes, and didn't tell me to change anything," Perkins marvels. "And [Atomic Monster] said, 'It's fucking great.' To my delight, because James Wan does *not* typically make comedies. I was clear from the start that this wouldn't be jump scares, it wouldn't be really dark — it was gonna be heartfelt and redemptive. A good time at the movies."

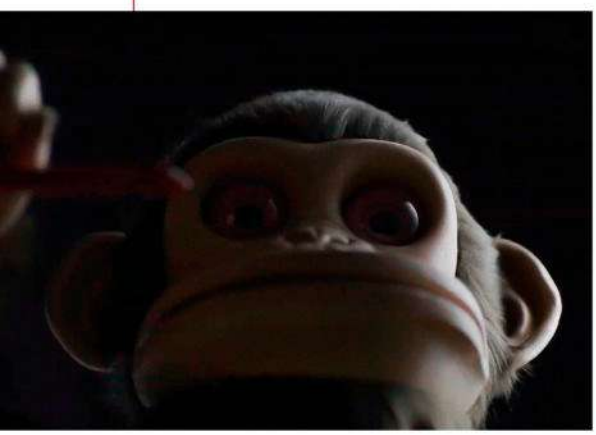
The tone was agreed upon. The script was in place. Now all Perkins needed to do was find his stars. Both human and faux-simian.

That monkey was *quite* a bit of kit," laughs Theo James, who plays both Bill and Hal in adulthood. "Fully animatronic — it could twizzle its drumsticks, it could change its face. You had 'relaxed' monkey, 'thoughtful' monkey, 'demon' monkey." Adds Tatiana Maslany, who plays the twins' mother Lois: "I don't know where that monkey is now, but I'm worried for whoever has it."

Aesthetically, Perkins already had what he calls "a very strong piece of IP" in the iconic 'Jolly Chimp' toy (which typically clashes its cymbals or — as in this film — bangs a drum). The primate percussionist has been used to unsettle audiences in everything from *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind* to *Toy Story 3* (via







Clockwise from main: Praise be! Stepdad Ted Hammerman (Elijah Wood) gives a hand to his wife (Laura Mennell) and Hal (Theo James); Lois (Tatiana Maslany) has a moment; The Monkey; A creepy rookie priest (Nicco Del Rio).

George A. Romero's 1988 horror *Monkey Shines*). "It's like a mannequin or a ventriloquist's dummy: it's been done a hundred times," says Perkins. "Certain things are just uncanny to the human eye, and that monkey toy is one of them."

What sets *The Monkey*'s monkey apart from those others is the technical wizardry that went into it. Rather than rely on CGI, Perkins was intent on going practical with the furry fiend at his film's core. He enlisted appropriately named Canadian effects outfit Amazing Ape (who also designed Nicolas Cage's horrifying *Longlegs* make-up) to build three high-tech playthings — "a couple we could throw around, and a 'hero' monkey that we controlled with a Sega Genesis-style controller, that could drum and smile and move its eyes. I think everyone prefers practical stuff — particularly actors," the director adds. "How could Theo interact passionately with this monkey if he couldn't actually *touch* it?"

James first met Perkins a few years back, developing a TV project that never came to fruition. They'd been looking to work together ever since, so the actor jumped at the chance to play *The Monkey*'s twin protagonists — even if it was a major challenge, both creatively and logistically. "It's a tough thing to do," James says, of playing two different characters (the twins are played as teens by Christian Convery). "Sometimes I'd be switching on the same day, playing Bill in the morning and Hal in the ›

afternoon. I initially had this naive idea that one of the twins could have a big, bushy beard, so we could shoot all his scenes first, then I'd shave it off and shoot the other's." He laughs. "Oz said: 'This is an indie film, Theo, we don't have the budget for that kind of schedule.'"

Even without Brian Blessed-esque facial hair to distinguish them, the two brothers are extremely different characters. "They're polar opposites," James tells us. "Bill was born four minutes earlier, so in his mind he's tougher — at least, that's the notion he forces on Hal. Hal is broken and shy — a good kid, with something horrendous that happens to him. A lot of this film is about the legacy of trauma. Whereas Bill's full of *joie de vivre*, but he's unstable. There are sociopathic tendencies." Perkins goes further: "It's the 'good' twin and the 'bully asshole supervillain' twin."

While pushing Bill's "insanity" as far as possible, James also looked to Tom Hanks' early "pragmatic straight-guy roles" as inspiration for Hal. "Hal is kind of a loser," adds Perkins. "He has a son he's detached from — but it's only because he's afraid that if he connects with his son, the monkey will come back. Hal is trying to neutralise the monkey, but Bill is in *love* with the monkey. Because it has this insane, destructive power."

Looming over Bill and Hal's tumultuous relationship is their mother, Lois, played by *She-Hulk* star Maslany (who Perkins calls "the best actor in the world, truly"). "There's a lot of love between Lois and the kids," Maslany tells us — and while she's keeping schtum on her character's precise involvement in the blood-soaked proceedings, she does reveal that, "The film has this beautiful running theme about exactly what *kind* of mom Lois is, and why she adores these boys so much." Lois is also responsible for delivering the line of dialogue that Perkins claims serves as the movie's central message — namely, "Everybody dies. And that's life."

"It's this idea that death is *absurd,*" says Maslany. "The way it happens is absurd, the *fact* that it happens is absurd. We play with that gleefully. Oz has that fucked-up, dark sense of humour, so the film is hugely funny."

Said fucked-up dark humour also powers another prominent character in *The Monkey*: the excellently named Ted Hammerman, played by Elijah Wood. "Ted is Hal's son's new [stepfather]," Perkins explains. "He's an 'expert' on fatherhood, who writes pedantic how-to-be-a-dad books. *Ted Hammerman*..." The director shudders at the name he himself dreamt up. "He's exactly as obnoxious as he sounds."

Whether or not Mr Hammerman meets a gruesome, monkey-catalysed demise remains to be seen. Either way, the catalogue of casualties in this film promises to be quite something. "All the death set-pieces were hard to do," says Perkins. "They all have a Rube Goldbergian connectivity — this happens, then *this* happens, then *this* happens..." All of which typically equals bucketloads of claret. "There is *a lot* of blood in this movie," Maslany laughs. "We're talking *Kill Bill*-level excess."

"The trick is not to get it in your eyes," advises James. "Lucky for me, Hal wears glasses." Perkins shrugs: "If you're going for comedy then you're going for extremes. Not subtlety. We are guilty of putting far more blood in our human bodies than is really in a human body. When someone explodes in this movie — and a couple of people do — there's a lot of mess."

Shooting took place in February and March last year in Vancouver, the same city Perkins shot *Longlegs* in over spring 2023. Having used much the same production team on both films, he even held a pre-release screening of *Longlegs* for cast and crew during filming on *The Monkey*. "It was amazing because we got to see [*Longlegs*] before it bounced Oz into the mainstream," says James. "And we were in the middle of making his next film, which is *so* different to it. I think that's great. He keeps getting better and better with each movie. After *The Monkey* — touch wood — he can do whatever he wants."

Clockwise from main: Cheeky Monkey; He'll need Vanish for that top; Another gory demise; Christian Convery plays the twins as youngsters; Writer-director-actor Perkins on set with James.

For now, all Perkins really seems to want is *The Monkey* out in the world. "I'm excited for people to see it," he grins. "It's a wild movie, man."

He has another film already in the can — a cabin-in-the-woods horror called *Keeper*, also starring Maslany, which he shot between *Longlegs* and *The Monkey*, and should surface later this year. But if *Longlegs*' success has meant an influx of mega-bucks studio offers, he's keeping quiet about it: "I don't want to make an *X-Men* movie, and I don't think anybody wants *me* to make an *X-Men* movie," he laughs. "I don't think mainstream movie [studios] are like, 'Oz Perkins: he's our next straight-down-the-middle guy!'"

Indeed, straight-down-the-middle does seem to be a path Perkins is intent on avoiding at all costs. He cites Robert Altman, Stanley Kubrick and The Beatles as artists he admires in terms of their refusal to ever stop experimenting. "I honestly feel fucking great about [how different *The Monkey* is from *Longlegs*]," he says. "I can't think of another morbidly surreal horror comedy that's also heartwarming and redemptive and stars a bona-fide movie hunk. That's the best news I can offer to people who liked *Longlegs* — we make *all kinds*. Why would anyone want to be fed the same meal every day?"

So far, those who have sampled this particular meal seem more than satisfied. Stephen King has "seen *The Monkey*, loves *The Monkey*", Perkins reports. And for James — who arrives at our interview fresh from his first screening — though the movie has "a twinkle in its eye", there's serious depth to it, too. "It's really about the legacy of trauma," he says. "How we cope we that." Perkins very much concurs: "It's that thing of, 'Our time is short, the world is hard, rotten things happen. But you have to go forward. You have to laugh. What else can you do?'"

Everybody dies. And that's life.

***THE MONKEY* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 21 FEBRUARY**

FRIGHTS-"R"-US

SALUTING CINEMA'S CREEPIEST PLAYTHINGS

THE CLOWN DOLL
POLTERGEIST
1982

Poltergeist is a very spooky film about a five-year-old girl who gets whisked into another realm, but scariest of all is the seemingly benign clown doll. Eight-year-old Robbie is already frightened by it, but all the more so when it drags him under the bed and attempts to choke him to death. Genuinely fucking horrifying.

CHUCKY
CHILD'S PLAY
1988

Pour one out for the baddest little bastard of them all. *Child's Play* introduced us to the doll possessed by a dead serial killer who, over the course of *eight* films and a TV series, murders people with a knife, hammer, scissors, switchblade, axe, electric drill, ruler… whatever he can get his stupid plastic hands on.

BABYFACE
TOY STORY
1995

Yes, Woody and Buzz stole the show, but take a minute to remember the mutant misfit toys created by Andy's lunkhead neighbour Sid, who mutilated and melded them together. Most upsetting is Babyface, a forcibly bald, single-eyeballed doll's head jammed onto metal spider legs. A truly unholy creation.

THE TOY PHONE
SKINAMARINK
2022

Canadian horror *Skinamarink* takes the haunted-house genre to unbearable proportions, but its hellish bastardisation of Fisher-Price toddler toy the Chatter Phone is especially, well, skin-crawling. Its sudden, deafening ring alone is enough to give you a heart attack, but then, there are the eyes… Good God, the eyes…

ALEX GODFREY

JASON REITMAN'S SATURDAY NIGHT CHRONICLES THE CHAOTIC 90 MINUTES LEADING WE CORRALLED THE CAST PLAYING THE CAST, FOR A SUITABLY ANARCHIC SUMMIT

LIVE

UP TO THE BROADCAST OF 1975'S FIRST-EVER *SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE*.

WORDS **MIKE RYAN**

WIRES

"THEY ARE A BUNCH OF DEGENERATES. THEY ARE CHAOS."

So jokes a *Saturday Night* cast member, who will remain safely anonymous, about his fellow actors. (Okay, you twisted our arm — Cooper Hoffman said that.) But after talking to director Jason Reitman and ten cast members, chaos (or, at least, controlled chaos) does seem to be the overarching theme of the making of *Saturday Night* — to the point that even Reitman had to remind his cast that, yes, there was a method to his madness and, yes, he knew what he was doing with it.

Saturday Night Live is an American institution. Currently celebrating its 50th season — think about *that* for a second — the show has lampooned politics and culture since Gerald Ford was President and *Jaws* was still in cinemas (four US Presidents have actually *appeared* on the show). Launched by Lorne Michaels (who, other than five seasons in the 1980s, has run the show for its duration), *SNL* is a weekly miracle, every Monday starting from scratch — writing sketches and building sets — then putting on a live show, with no safety net.

"I remember as a kid watching *Saturday Night Live* and being in disbelief they did this every single week," Reitman tells *Empire*. "It felt like something special that you should only get once a year." The current cast has 17 members, but the original 'Not Ready For Prime Time Players' had only seven. And with a country still reeling from Watergate and Vietnam, those seven had a monumental task in front of them.

Saturday Night (as the show itself was originally titled) is a "fever dream", as actor Matt Wood (John Belushi) calls it, depicting the 90 minutes leading up to the first-ever episode back in 1975. There are confused executives, an angry Johnny Carson, a defiant Milton Berle exposing himself (a version of this really happened) — all framed like it's an actual episode of *Saturday Night Live*.

Which of its players had to fight back tears at an airport newsagent? Who got called out on a *Ghostbusters* red carpet? Who sang a rousing rendition of 'Purple Rain' during karaoke to blow off some steam? Ahead, the cast of *Saturday Night* give us all the ins and outs of this remarkable and unusual film shoot — to the point they themselves started to feel like their own comedy troupe.

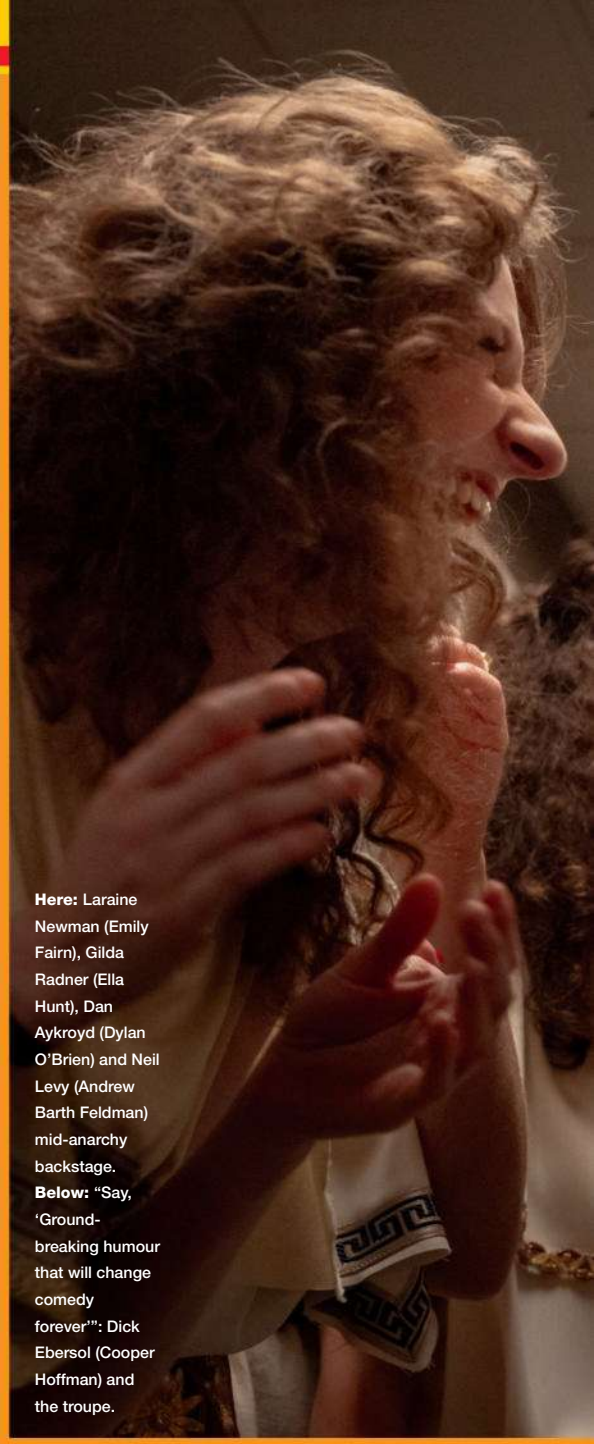
Replicating some of the most recognisable comedic actors of all time wouldn't be easy. The chosen actors had to both look the part and be able to deliver a dynamite performance.

Matt Wood (John Belushi, *SNL* cast member): The initial audition, Jason sent me the cold opening from, I think, the third season. Belushi's got the cup of coffee and he's holding the show hostage because they won't give in to his demands. The first line is, "Hi, it's John Belushi."

Emily Fairn (Laraine Newman, cast member): I was doing *Brokeback Mountain* in the West End with Lucas Hedges and Mike Faist. And Lucas was walking down the street in London and bumped into Jason Reitman. Lucas was like, "I'm doing a play, you should come see it." Jason said the minute I came on stage he was like, "Oh my God, she looks like Laraine Newman."

Kim Matula (Jane Curtin, cast member): The very first audition, I was so stoked about it. Dan Aykroyd is in charge of school lunches and Jane is the interviewer. I had watched that sketch so many times in my life already, when I got that audition I knew exactly where the inflection was supposed to be.

Gabriel LaBelle (Lorne Michaels, producer): I walk outside and Cooper Hoffman is there. He



Here: Laraine Newman (Emily Fairn), Gilda Radner (Ella Hunt), Dan Aykroyd (Dylan O'Brien) and Neil Levy (Andrew Barth Feldman) mid-anarchy backstage. **Below:** "Say, 'Ground-breaking humour that will change comedy forever'": Dick Ebersol (Cooper Hoffman) and the troupe.

walks in and auditions for Belushi. And when he's done, Jason comes out asking Cooper to cold-read for Dick Ebersol.

Cooper Hoffman (Dick Ebersol, NBC's Director of Late Night): I'll clear this up, that's not what happened. The very first audition I gave Jason was the John Belushi tape. And then he was like, "Bring him in for Dick Ebersol." So, the audition I was going in for was Dick Ebersol.

Wood: Cooper would do this great bit on set where I'd finish something, "Now if *I* had done that..."

Hoffman: I don't remember that! That's really funny, though, if I did. But, also, I shouldn't have done that. I probably did.

LaBelle: And we do this chemistry read, of just us. We both thought it went horribly.

Hoffman: It was *fine*. Jason really saw something, and thank God he did.

LaBelle: Jason really dug it and cast us both.

Ella Hunt (Gilda Radner, cast member): When I got this role, I was on my way home for Christmas. I got the call at JFK and wept in a Hudson News.

Dylan O'Brien (Dan Aykroyd, cast member): Jason was like, "Can you be funny?" And I was like, "I don't know." And I was like, "I guess I have to go be funny."

Reitman instructed his cast not to reach out to the people they are playing, something almost everyone seemed to ignore.

Matula: I did talk to Jane on the phone for about an hour. I didn't seek it out! The opportunity presented itself to me and I took it.

Lamorne Morris (Garrett Morris, cast member): I got a chance to hang out with Garrett. He's one of the coolest dudes. Possibly too cool. This man would call me and say, "Tell your mama I owe her a call to remind her I am not your daddy."

Rachel Sennott (Rosie Shuster, writer): I got to talk to Rosie, which was amazing.

Fairn: We've [Fairn and Newman] been texting quite a lot. I just asked her fun stuff like, "What cigarettes did you like smoking?" And she smoked Parliaments. In most scenes I have a pack of Parliaments in my back pocket.

LaBelle: I got to meet Lorne briefly, at *SNL*. He was very gracious and invited us to the show.

Cory Michael Smith (Chevy Chase, cast member): I have not spoken to Chevy.

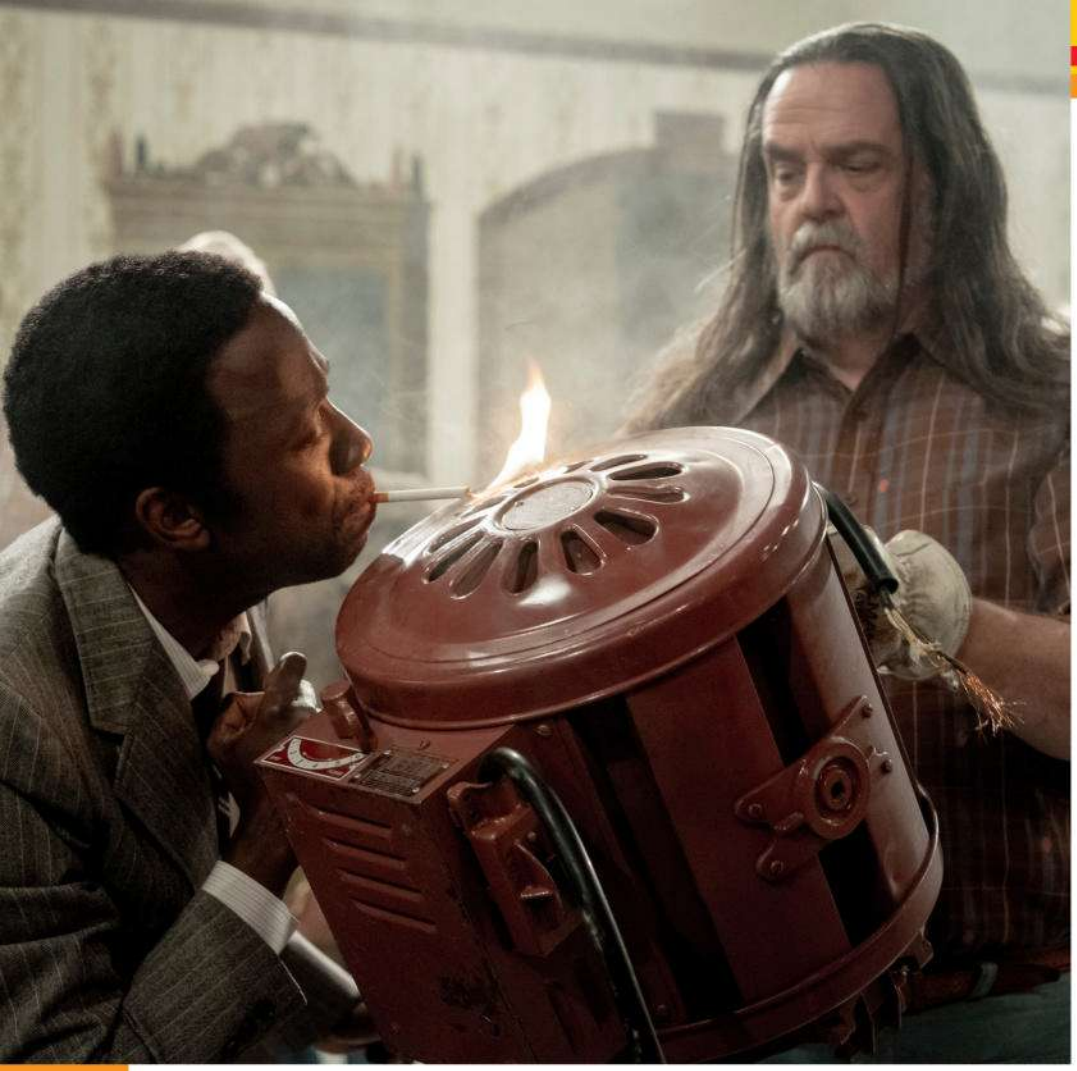
O'Brien: The only [time] Dan's ever commented about my participation in the movie, he was asked about it on the carpet of the *Ghostbusters: Frozen Empire* premiere. He obviously doesn't know who I am and he's getting asked about it. And he was like, "Well, I'm glad the young actor's got work." And I was like, "Oh my God, we are ›

so alike." I love that answer. I feel seen.
Smith: Fifty years is a really long time. People change and evolve. And what we're trying to capture is a time and era not everyone can reflect back to.
Morris: I presented Garrett with an award at the ABFF [American Black Film Festival]. He commanded a room, telling old stories about his childhood and how he got the agency to become a singer from church. I grew up in the church and that's where I started performing. A lot of Black folks have that same origin story of the church being that foundation. We have the same last name, so as I'm watching this man, I'm going, "Man, he might be right — this man might be my daddy."
Smith: I wanted to make sure I captured this side of Chevy that is young and vulnerable and a little nervous and someone in love.
Wood: I've been getting the comparisons to Belushi since I was around 13 or 14, doing community theatre. A local reviewer threw it out for the first time. My dad was like, "Oh, you need to see *Animal House*!"
Smith: [In] *Foul Play* and *Fletch*, [Chase is] super chill, really easy, really smooth. And then he transitions into 'doofy dad'. But at that time, he was a stud. Those two films I watched quite a bit.
Wood: *Continental Divide* is one of the only Belushi movies I'd never seen before. It was the most useful one, too. I like to think of great roles that he would have been up for. Maybe he would have played Pesci's role in *Casino*.
O'Brien: I totally relate to Dan's aloofness with it. And I had so much intel from Jason, who obviously grew up around him.
Sennott: If you look at women in comedy, this is such a beginning for it.
Matula: Jason told me before we started shooting, "It was a boys' club then and it might feel like a boys' club on set because we are recreating that." Absolutely it can be helpful; it doesn't mean it makes it more fun. It kind of sucks, but it was very true to the time.
Hunt: I think I've been impacted by Gilda's legacy long before I realised it was Gilda impacting me.
Matula: Women were not propped up. There were members of the cast who were like, "Women aren't funny and they shouldn't be here." That's really hard. Luckily, now, obviously the men we were working with do believe women are funny. So that was helpful.
Sennott: I'm not cool in social situations like Rosie — I panic. So that was very fun to take that on.
Matula: When reading the script, Jason was very much, "I know that it seems like there's not much for you in the script. And maybe not much for some of the other women in the script. There's just more storyline for the men." But that's kind of the way it was. As an actor, wanting to play and create and being on set every day with all of these people? As a woman, yes, you want to be part of the storylines and games that they get to play.

The set was unusual — a three-storey re-creation of the *SNL* studio was built outside Atlanta. The cast would share a suite off the set, decked out with a common recreation room.

Jason Reitman (director): We didn't have trailers on this movie. We had the set, then we had a building next to the set where we had a huge room filled with 1970s furniture, and that's where the cast hung out.
Sennott: Basically, we each had our own little rooms. But there was a big common space. Everyone would come out and hang.
Morris: It pissed me off! Today is the day I'm getting a single trailer for *myself*! Full double wide!
Hunt: Can you imagine if we had all been in double-deckers?
Morris: Yes, I *can* imagine that! It's a beautiful dream! I got a '70s fucking couch. It was a comfortable couch, nonetheless.
Fairn: This was my first job in America, so I was like, "Is this what it's always like?"
Matula: There's a video of us playing ping-pong in our bee costumes. Those are memories I am

Right: Garrett Morris (Lamorne Morris) cadges a light. **Below, left to right:** John Belushi (Matt Wood) kicks back; Jim Henson (Nicholas Braun) with a green alien puppet...; Milton Berle (J.K. Simmons) keeps it old-school; Lorne Michaels (Gabriel LaBelle), Jacqueline Carlin (Kaia Gerber) and Chevy Chase (Cory Michael Smith). **Bottom:** The chaos commences.



going to have forever. We were all getting together just like this cast was getting together for the first time.

Fairn: There was a TV always playing '70s *SNL*. I think it was the same episode on loop. Someone was like, "Can we put other stuff on, please?"

Reitman: This is a movie where every actor worked almost every single day. Every background actor worked every single day. And it coalesced like a family. I think you can feel that on screen.

It was a raucous and unusual shoot. Everyone on set was mic'd. Often actors wouldn't know if the camera was even on them or not.

Reitman: This is the most carefully written script I've ever done.

Hoffman: Listen, I had no idea what this movie was going to be. Jason, there was a method to his madness. But it was a little bit chaotic. There were moments of, "What are we even shooting here?"

Reitman: We wanted it to be a movie that was immersive. That made you feel like you got thrown on the set and now there's this world of chaos around you.

O'Brien: It was not a normal shoot. There were 80 mics.

Hoffman: I love the subtlety of Laraine Newman being jealous of Dan Aykroyd flirting with Rosie. I never saw that on set! There's a part of me that feels like Emily might not have even known the camera was on her, but she showed up every fucking day.

Fairn: A lot of the time you didn't even know if you were on camera. Then you watch it and you're like, "Oh, the camera is on me and I had no idea."

Hoffman: That's so awesome to me. Even though she thought she was in the background, she still put on a fucking performance. And a fucking good one, too.

Fairn: I think Jason conveyed that really well and every now and then had a close-up of my face. She's having a tough time with the guy she likes.

Smith: I actually don't think I've been a part of any ensemble where I'm like, "Everyone is playing at such an extraordinary level."

Matula: Seeing Matt do Belushi blew my mind.

Hunt: To watch Lamorne intensely be Garrett. And every time we did another take it elevated a little.

Morris: And Jason uses the worst take. (*Laughs*)

Hoffman: This goes back to going to Jason and going, "Hey, are we doing alright?" And him being like, "I know what I'm doing." Which he did have to say to us a few times.

Wood: To me, the movie is a fever dream. It's Lorne Michaels' nightmare, essentially.

Over the course of this peculiar shoot, bonds were formed and steam was blown off. A lot like what happened with the original *SNL* cast (only this time, presumably, with a lot less drug use).

Wood: It's one of the most fun groups of people ever assembled to work on a project. So, antics were bound to happen...

Hunt: We were staying in this town right by the film studio that was kind of this movie town. And because it was just coming off the strike, it was really just us and the cast of [James Gunn's] *Superman*.

Sennott: It felt like a college campus. So you'd run into people at the gym, or the one bar. That's all there was in the town. Or the coffee shop, so there were three things.

Matula: There were a couple karaoke nights.

Hoffman: I'm pretty sure it was only one night.

Matula: Want me to look up the bar? I'll look it up. It was called Fairway Social! We would often go there to have a drink and talk about the day.

Hoffman: Fairway Social! I love Kim looking that up. That's so funny. She is the mom of the group. She might hate that I said that.

Wood: I think everyone really needed this. We had a *fantastic* karaoke night in town. Everyone let off some steam. Cory sang a stunning 'Purple Rain'. Lamorne did a beautiful 'Unchained Melody'. I sang some Tom Jones: 'It's Not Unusual'.

Hoffman: Movies are a bubble. When I made *Licorice Pizza*, it was really hard to leave that bubble. The bummer about this movie was [the cast were] so funny; I think about them all the time.

Sennott: You become so close with people, then you just go away. It's never going to be the same.

***SATURDAY NIGHT* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 31 JANUARY**

IN THE 1970s, HAVING UNLEASHED THE FIRST-EVER X-RATED CARTOON MOVIE WITH *FRITZ THE CAT*, **RALPH BAKSHI** TOOK ON TOLKIEN. PIONEERING AND PROVOCATIVE IN EQUAL MEASURE, ANIMATION'S BIGGEST MAVERICK TALKS *EMPIRE* THROUGH HIS UNCOMPROMISING CAREER

WORDS **TOM ELLEN** **RUSSELL MOORCROFT**

MERCHANT

Ralph Bakshi

STARED DOWN AT THE PAGE, not quite able to believe what he was seeing.

It was May 1971, and the Brooklyn-reared director had just moved his fledgling animation studio — Bakshi Productions — from New York to Los Angeles to complete work on his debut film. He was beginning that day much as he began every other day at the time — with a cup of black coffee, a cigarette, steak and eggs with plenty of ketchup, and a copy of *Variety* magazine. As he flipped through the latest issue, though, Bakshi was shocked to find his own name staring back at him.

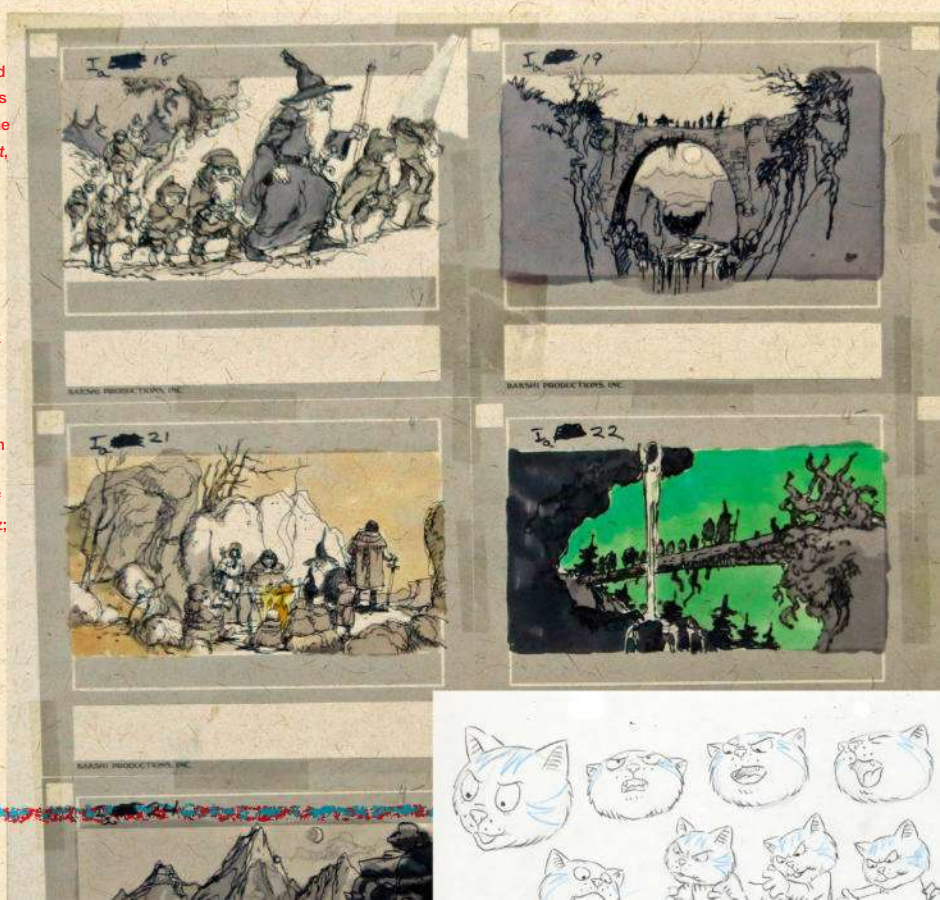
"All these hot-shot Disney animators had taken out a full-page ad about me," the 86-year-old recalls today, with a disbelieving chuckle. "They said the industry didn't need a guy like me, and I should take my 'junk and pornography' and go back to New York! I was stunned."

The "junk and pornography" in question was the film Bakshi was in the process of finishing. Based on Robert Crumb's subversive underground comics, *Fritz The Cat* was a blackly comedic satire charting the grubby adventures of a sex-obsessed feline. The movie is book-ended by two orgies (one in a bathtub, one in a hospital), and between them: drugs, bar fights, race riots and the army carpet-bombing Harlem while Mickey Mouse cheers them on. Released in the spring of 1972, it became the first-ever animated feature to receive an 'X' rating, and — with a box office of $90 million against a $700,000 budget — one of the most successful independent films of all time. The Disney 'hot-shots' were right to be wary. There had *never* been a cartoon like this before.

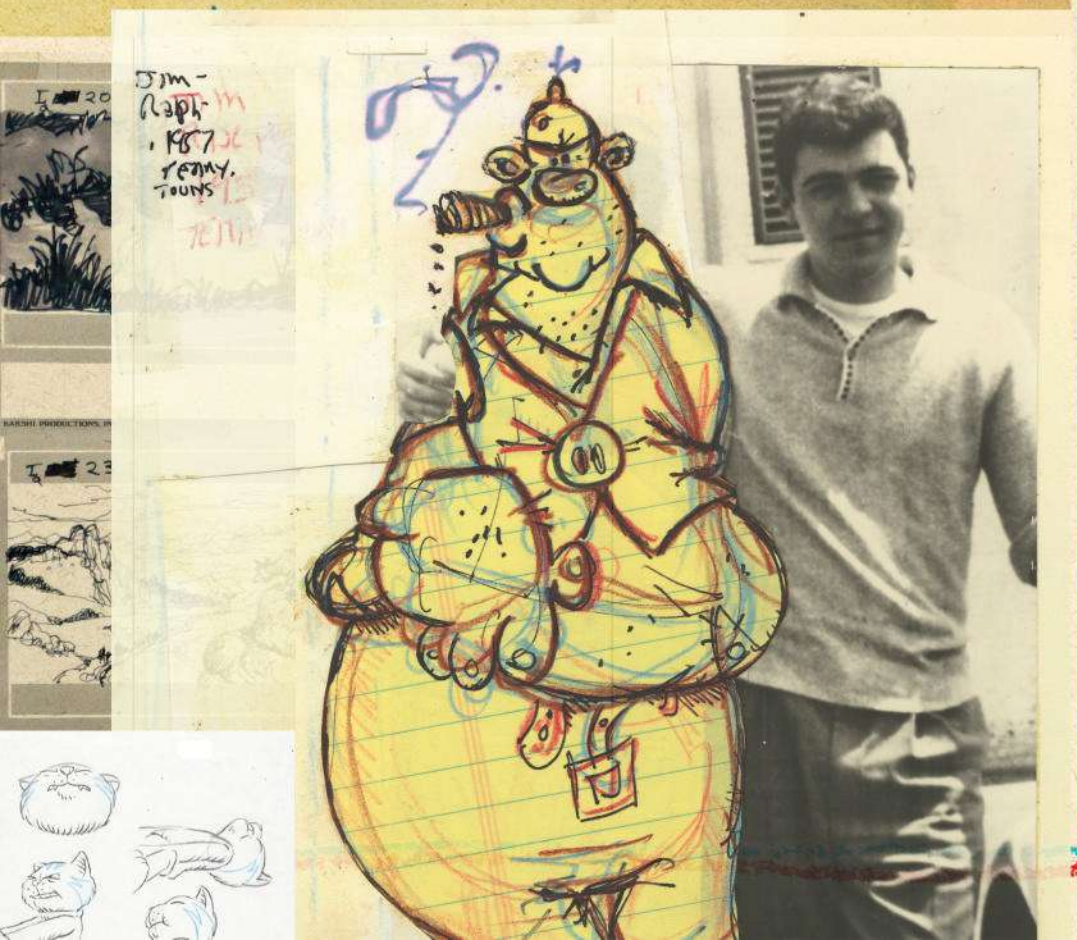
"Disney tried to kill me because they knew I was sitting on a pot of gold," Bakshi tells *Empire*. "At the time, they thought they owned animation — and I was moving into an area of animation they couldn't touch. They were the good guys, they were 'wishing upon a star'! What I was doing in *Fritz*... They couldn't go there."

With *Fritz*, Bakshi changed animation overnight, proving the genre had potential to expand *way* beyond children's entertainment, and lighting a fuse that would eventually lead to the explosion of *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, *Beavis And Butt-Head* and *Rick And Morty*. Throughout the '70s and '80s, the director became a darling of Hollywood — his wild, anti-establishment output lapped up by famous fans like Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese and Arnold Schwarzenegger. He rubbed shoulders with Tinseltown's great and good: as he relays, Brad Pitt slept on his floor, and Sly Stallone slept in his car (more on both incidents shortly).

Today, though, while his dream of an alternative to mainstream animation has been thoroughly realised, Bakshi's name is rarely mentioned outside cinema-nerd circles. Not that it bothers him. The godfather of adult 'toons is



Clockwise from main: Fritz (voiced by Skip Hinnant) is on the run from the pigs (*Fritz The Cat*, 1972); 1960s Terrytoons kids' show *Deputy Dawg*, where Ralph Bakshi cut his animation teeth; Artist Frank Frazetta with Bakshi in 1983; The 'toon titan at Terrytoons with an animated pal in 1957; Sketches of cheeky feline Fritz; A selection of storyboards for 1978's *The Lord Of The Rings*.



content to be well out of the industry — happiest at home in New Mexico, painting and spending time with family. "You have to understand," he says. "Making these movies was very painful and stressful for me. I had two nervous breakdowns. It wasn't easy. I was fighting every step of the way."

For more than four decades, where Bakshi went, chaos followed. Both on screen and off.

THE TWO SIDES OF BAKSHI'S PERSONALITY — hardscrabble Brooklynite and cartoon-loving goofball — are both on display within minutes of *Empire*'s interview beginning.

Answering his "flip phone" from his New Mexico home, the octogenarian greets us with a gruff, "WHADDAYAGOT?" — sounding not dissimilar to Rob Brydon impersonating Al Pacino. But get him laughing about something, and Bakshi's 'Noo Yoik' growl quickly dissolves into a high-pitched giggle that recalls Roger Rabbit. "I loved cartoons as a kid," he says. "But we were poor immigrants — we couldn't afford comic books. I'd dig through trashcans for comics. Only time I got a new one was when I got sick. So I couldn't *wait* to get sick."

Bakshi was born in 1938 to Jewish parents in Mandatory Palestine — his family emigrated to the Big Apple a year later. At 15, he unearthed a copy of Gene Byrnes' *The Complete Guide To Cartooning*, and what had previously been a trashcan-toppling hobby became an obsession. By 18, he'd found work polishing animation cels at cartoon studio Terrytoons. Within months, he'd been upgraded to animating, and at 25 was promoted to director, helming popular children's shows like *Sad Cat* and *Deputy Dawg*, and even creating his own series — *The Mighty Heroes*. "I have good instincts on how to sell to people," he says of his swift clamber up the career ladder. "It comes from growing up in Brooklyn — surviving on the streets."

By the late '60s, though, he was finding the lack of diversity in animation frustrating. Churning out Saturday-morning kids' fodder was all well and good, but Bakshi yearned to create art inspired by the world around him: "I'd go to Washington Square Park and see freaks and drug addicts and people acting like idiots. It was hilarious! I wanted to cartoon *those* people." He founded his own studio — Bakshi Productions — in 1968, purely because "no-one wanted to make the movies I wanted to make", and when he came across Robert Crumb's lewd, druggy, hippie-mocking *Fritz The Cat* books, he knew he had the foundation for his first film.

Trouble was, no-one wanted to fund it. This was the age of the Disney monopoly on feature-length animation, and people were used to seeing cartoon animals crooning about the "bear necessities", not smoking weed and shooting cops. "I had people walk out on me saying they wouldn't work on this 'garbage'," Bakshi laughs. "They weren't sure how far I was going to take it. But neither was I! No-one had done anything like this before, so I just kept upping the ante."

Turned down by every distributor in ›

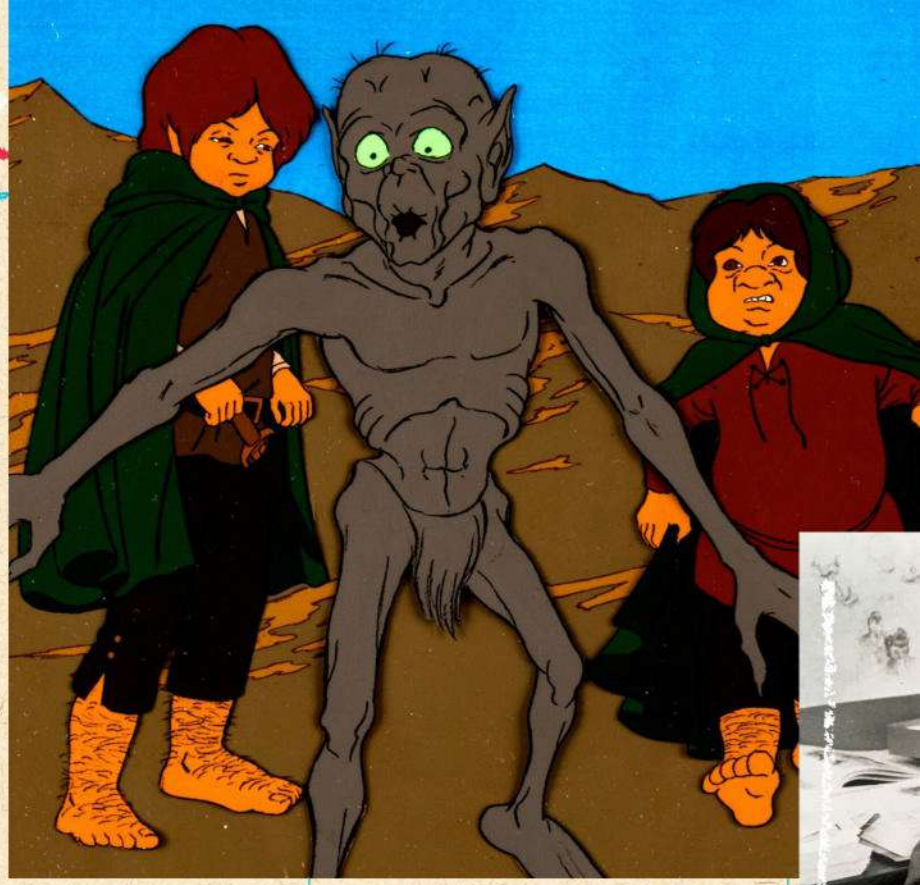
town, Bakshi eventually wangled some cash from a company that specialised in 'exploitation' B-movies — but he soon found that a shoestring budget worked in his favour anyway. "I couldn't afford voice actors," he explains, "so I'd go to Greenwich Village and record kids in the street. I'd pay them ten bucks, then animate the recordings. They were a million times better than actors, because they had believability." It was a technique the director used throughout his career — inviting "construction workers, Black Panthers, radicals" into his office, engaging them in discussion, and then having their voices emerge from cartoon rabbits, bulls and crows. "Having no money forced me towards realism," he laughs.

Even after *Fritz* bulldozed the box office — becoming the most successful independent animated film ever — he didn't stray from that path. His follow-up, *Heavy Traffic*, saw him swap anthropomorphic animals for cartoon humans, and zero in on New York's seedy underbelly, a world of masochistic transvestites and brutal mobsters. Released in 1973, *Heavy Traffic* is arguably Bakshi's masterpiece — a nihilistic urban drama that blends visceral animation with avant-garde live-action, and features one memorable scene in which Jesus murders God ("You've been conning us all along, Pop," JC hisses at his dad's still-warm corpse). "I got away with a lot, because it was brilliantly reviewed," chuckles Bakshi. "Without the critics' support, I probably would've got thrown out of the industry."

Instead, the industry was accepting this new maverick with open arms. Bakshi had arrived — and Hollywood was about to come knocking.

"I AM NOT," BAKSHI SAYS AT ONE POINT during our chat, "opposed to making millions of dollars. I just happen to be great at throwing fortunes away."

He's not kidding. By the mid-'70s, while he was by no means part of the 'establishment' — he was still working for himself, rather than other studios — the strength and singularity of Bakshi's output was attracting attention from major players. He became pals with Scorsese, Spielberg and Coppola, and even had to fend off young actors traipsing across the country to offer him jobs.



This page, right: Hobbits and Gollum in *The Lord Of The Rings*. **Inset:** Brad Pitt behind the scenes of 1992's *Cool World*. **Bottom left:** Fritz might be needing some extra Felix. **Facing page, top to bottom:** Kim Basinger in *Cool World*; Dark fantasy *Wizards* (1977); 1983's *Fire And Ice*; Bakshi with his *Rings* cast — live action was traced, known as rotoscoping; Spectacular action in the finished film.

"Sylvester Stallone came to LA to meet me," he recalls. "He loved *Heavy Traffic*, and he gave me the script to *Rocky*, and said, 'I want you to direct it.' He needed somewhere to stay, so he slept in my car. My wife wouldn't let him sleep in the house. She said, 'We don't know who he is!' Anyway... I turned *Rocky* down." Does he regret it? "Are you *kidding* me?" he bellows, back in Brydon-Pacino mode. "Of course! I could have been the richest man in Brooklyn! But I didn't want to leave animation. I was an animator — I loved my studio and my staff. I was friends with Stallone afterwards, and he'd break my balls about [*Rocky*], telling me I threw away millions."

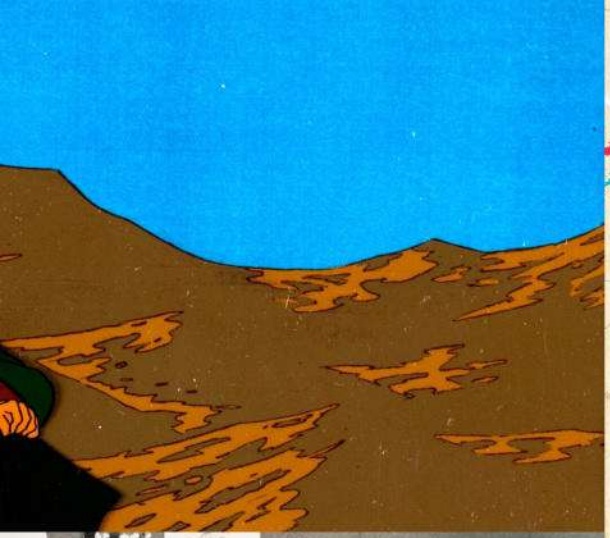
This was not an isolated incident. A few years later, another muscle-bound fan — Arnold Schwarzenegger — approached Bakshi about directing a sword-and-sorcery romp called *Conan The Barbarian*. "He took me to lunch," Bakshi remembers. "My friend Frank Frazetta used to paint the *Conan* book covers, and he drew the character lithe and tight, like a panther. Not muscular. So I told Schwarzenegger, 'I'll do the film, but you should lose a few pounds.'" He pauses before bursting into Roger Rabbit giggles: "Never heard from him again!"

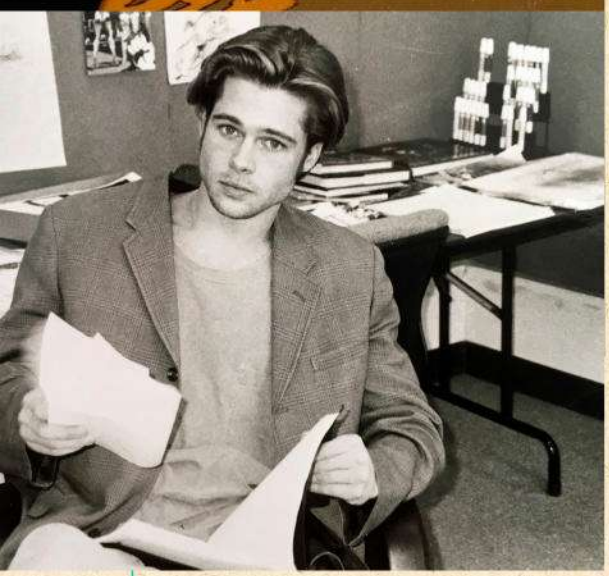
Swords and sorcery were on Bakshi's radar by this point, anyway. Around the same time he was giving Arnie diet tips, the director was also in the final stages of realising a childhood dream — animating *The Lord Of The Rings*. The story goes that Bakshi, during one of his morning *Variety*-browsings, read that United Artists had bought the rights to Tolkien's epic. He marched straight down there ("Everyone thinks you have to call an agent first — bullshit!"), turfed Peter Bogdanovich out of a meeting with the president ("Bogdanovich never spoke to me again either"), and had secured the gig by end of play. "I was such a fucking great salesman, you can't believe it," he chuckles, proudly.

If the sale was easy, though, the making was anything but. The book's vast battle scenes would have taken "25 million years" to animate in the '70s, so Bakshi used the technique of Rotoscoping — painting over live-action footage. "We shot an entire live-action movie!" he says. "All the Orcs, Frodo being chased on horseback, it was all real." The Battle Of Helm's Deep, in particular, was a slog — filmed at a 15th-century castle in Spain, the sequence required the wrangling of hundreds of extras, all decked out with shields, spears and axes. "It was freezing cold, we had no money," Bakshi sighs. "Very, very tough shoot."

Not to mention he was also contending with studio execs (one asked if *The Lord Of The Rings* was "about a wedding") and rock stars. "Mick Jagger wanted to play Frodo," Bakshi recalls. "He came to the studio, and everyone was screaming and falling on the floor. My kid was there — he was 16. He was so terrified he hid in the bathroom." But the role had already been recorded (by actor Christopher Guard). "I woulda let him play Frodo, otherwise," Bakshi says. "Nothing wrong with Mick." Bakshi's British voice-cast was none too shabby — it included John Hurt as Aragorn and a fresh-off-*Star-Wars* Anthony Daniels as Legolas. "I can't tell you how great those guys were," says Bakshi of his actors. "I went to England to record them, and I was embarrassed to give them direction." The man behind *Fritz The Cat* could barely believe it.

Finally released in 1978, the film has often been said to be an influence on the aesthetic of Peter Jackson's trilogy — indeed, in a director's commentary Jackson himself said that he included an homage to Bakshi's film in *The Fellowship Of The Ring* ("That shot of [the Hobbit] Proudfoot shouting, 'Proudfeet'... I deliberately copied the angle that Ralph Bakshi used, which I thought was brilliant"). Sadly, Bakshi wasn't — and still isn't — entirely satisfied. "Never even spoke to me!" he says with





a sigh. "So, I can't watch those films. I don't wanna sit there aggravated." His voice drops to a mumble, as he adds: "I still feel very beat up about that."

DESPITE EARNING OVER $30 MILLION from its $4 million budget, *The Lord Of The Rings*' stressful production had knocked the stuffing out of Bakshi. And as the '80s rolled around, the knocks kept coming.

His *Conan*-esque 1983 fantasy *Fire And Ice* underperformed commercially, and his attempt to adapt *The Catcher In The Rye* for animation was rejected by author J.D. Salinger. Jaded with film, Bakshi returned to TV in 1987, to reboot Terrytoons stalwart *Mighty Mouse*. But when Robert Zemeckis' *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* hit big a year later, studios were suddenly clamouring for directors who could blend live-action with animation, and Bakshi's phone began ringing again. He pitched Paramount a horror movie called *Cool World*, in which a cartoonist impregnates his own doodle (hang on, it gets weirder), and the resulting half-human-half-toon offspring climbs out of the sketchbook to murder him. Paramount bit, and offered Bakshi $28 million.

"I wanted to be like Scorsese and my director friends," he says. "The studios protected them — gave them money and took care of the business side. But because of that, they also controlled the film. And my ego didn't like that."

Bakshi's ego began taking hits right away. His script was rewritten to soften the horror elements (and remove the patricide). He fought — and lost — against the studio casting Kim Basinger as doodle-turned-human Holli Would and Gabriel Byrne as her cartoonist creator ("both too old, in my mind"). The only battle he won was convincing Paramount to give the part of the toon-world-dwelling detective to a then-unknown 26-year-old he'd seen in early rushes of *Thelma & Louise*. "Paramount said, 'Who the hell is *Brad Pitt*?'" Bakshi cackles. "They'd never heard of him. But I knew he was perfect — he reminded me of James Dean. He slept on my floor for a while."

By the time *Cool World* was released in 1992, studio interference had muddied the plot beyond repair. It recouped just half its budget, and left Bakshi permanently disillusioned with filmmaking. "I did *Cool World* to make money for once in my life, but I still wasn't happy," he sighs. "I left the business beaten, broken and tired."

He has made only one film since — 2015 short *Last Days Of Coney Island* — and is adamant that it will be his last. "I'm through," he says. "I'm doing what I was born to do — draw and paint. I'm having a good time. Life is normal. I don't have many years left. What am I gonna do — start fighting again?"

At 86, he sounds genuinely content with his lot — and why not? A true originator, he has suffered and scrapped for his art, redefining what animation could achieve and kicking down doors for the likes of Matt Groening, Mike Judge, and Matt Stone & Trey Parker to step through.

"I dreamed of having my own studio, creating an alternative to Disney," Bakshi says. "I'm still stunned it actually happened. When I left Hollywood, I thought I'd lost. But the fact that my pictures are still playing and being talked about all these years later... In the end, it all worked out perfectly." He gives us one last blast of that infectious Roger Rabbit giggle: "I won."

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final cut

SPOILER WARNING

A FRESH LOOK AT HOME ENTERTAINMENT

MARCH 2025 | EDITED BY **CHRIS HEWITT**

Alien Resurrector

DIRECTOR FEDE ALVAREZ ON REVIVING THE *ALIEN* FRANCHISE WITH ALIEN: ROMULUS

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

JUST BEFORE *ALIEN: Romulus* launched in cinemas back in April, the movie's director, Fede Alvarez, introduced a screening for *Empire* VIP Club members (sign up now, kids!). Directors' intros are usually short, straightforward and fairly bland. Not so with Alvarez, who takes a different tack. His parting words to the audience: "I want you to love it, but if you don't love it... I want you to fucking hate it."

A few months down the line, it's clear that audiences erred dramatically towards the former. *Alien: Romulus*, which tells the story of a group of scavengers stuck on a space station that has Xenomorphed into a deadly hellscape, made around $350 million worldwide, becoming one of the biggest films in the franchise that launched with Ridley Scott's 1979 *Alien* (of which *Romulus* is a continuation, taking place in-between that film and James Cameron's *Aliens*).

It's not been an entirely smooth ride, though, with some pushback over certain decisions made by Alvarez — namely, the use of, "Get away from her, you bitch!", the payoff line made famous in *Aliens*, and perhaps more seriously, the introduction of an android called Rook, designed to look and sound like Ian Holm's Ash, which many thought was an AI creation. (It's actually an animatronic puppet that was on set, augmented with CG and voiced by a combination of actor Daniel Betts and archive audio of Holm, with the blessing of his estate).

But Alvarez is, if that wasn't already clear, someone who's unafraid of speaking his mind, as we discovered when we sat down with the Uruguayan director on Zoom to talk about the film's reception, those moments, and the art/science of making E.T.s scary again...

That intro of yours in April has stuck with me. The movie's made $350 million worldwide; I'm guessing most people loved it.
Well, yes. And also, I got what I wanted — I think some people really didn't like it, right? I don't resent anybody for hating a movie. I remember going to see *The Force Awakens* and being really disappointed by it. Like, "Fuck this thing. What is this movie?" And then I rewatched it two weeks later, going, "You know what? That's exactly the movie they need to do. It was the only way to bring back the franchise."

***The Force Awakens* is an interesting comparison, in that it was very much modelled on the structure of the first *Star Wars*. *Romulus* isn't. It's playing with our expectations of what an *Alien* film is, but subverts them, too.**
The main thing was, it needs to feel like a classic *Alien* movie. You watch two frames of it and you go, "That's *Alien*, right?" That's hard. So we had to do that first, and then we were going to tell a different story, different characters, a different angle. We can spend hours talking about *Star Wars: Episode I* versus *Force Awakens*. When I watch *Force Awakens*, I remember complaining to my friends that at least *Episode I* went for something, but in a way, at the time, it was too far removed from *Star Wars*. So I wanted to find some balance in the Force between those two. Hopefully, what *Romulus* did was to be in-between those two examples.

You said once before that when you started to develop this movie, you were reinventing the Xenomorph, the Facehugger, everything.
We were trying to subvert expectations. The first instinct was, "Let's try to come up with new

Main: The horror: A Xenomorph makes its presence known. **Left:** Writer-director Fede Alvarez.

things at every level. Then a friend told me, "Why would you improve on perfection? Don't try that. You're not as good as Ridley Scott." And everybody should be grateful to him.

Did Ridley, who produced, ever say to you, "You can't improve upon what I did"?
Funnily enough, it was kind of the other way around. When he saw it, he really liked it. He still does. But he looked at me and said, tongue-in-cheek, "You stole my ideas." I was like, "Your ideas are the best ones. That's what people want to see." But part of him wanted me to just take it in a different direction. I remember asking him about the Offspring at the end, and he was like, "Didn't love it." I think everything I tried to do new, he didn't love, and the things that were classics, he wasn't happy that I stole from him! But I love that man to death. ›

I would have thought he would have loved the Offspring, because it has the Engineer's face and keeps the flame of *Prometheus* alive.
In his defence, that was when he saw the first cut, and the first cut was slightly different. There was a progression of the design. My instinct was that you need to keep evolving, so the head starts to grow, and when we saw it outside the ship, it was almost turned into a Xenomorph; it was like the strongest DNA was winning. That was the cut he saw. He didn't like it. And what sealed the deal was, we screened the movie for Alex Garland and Alex said, "Don't change the creature. Don't let it evolve into a Xenomorph."

There were strong reactions also to the appearance of Rook, the android character whose face and voice were modelled on Ian Holm's. That was largely an animatronic puppet.
Look, it was a mix of a lot of techniques. [Animatronic puppeteer] Shane Mahan actually did this animatronic of Ian Holm based on a head cast from *Lord Of The Rings*, and that was the only one in existence. To be honest, it was such an ambitious thing, and later in the game we figured out the way to do it better, and we just ran out of time in post-production to get it right. I wasn't 100 per cent happy with some of the shots, where you could feel a bit more the CG intervention. So, for people that react negatively, I don't blame them. But we fixed it. We made it better for the release right now. I convinced the studio we need to spend the money and make sure we give the companies that were involved in making it the proper time to finish it and do it right. It's so much better. What we did was revert a lot more to the puppet. It's way better.

Another thing that divided audiences was the line David Jonsson's Andy says: "Get away from her, you bitch."
Again, that's another one I don't blame anybody for hating. We did a version of 'Andy lands on the Xenomorph, shoots it in the face, and turns around'. There was something missing, particularly because we're trying to capture that '80s vibe. You want the one-liner. You want something like, "It's just been revoked" (*from* Lethal Weapon 2). And at some point I went to David and said, "Why don't you try, 'Get away from her, you bitch,' with a little bit of a stutter?" David looks at me and goes, "Fuck off, I'm not doing that. Don't make me do this." I'm like, "Dude, just try it. If it doesn't work, it won't be in the movie." And because he's young, he did it. Veteran actors, they don't do it. They know if they give you one shot, you'll use it. They tend to be more stubborn. But he, being young and naive, goes, "Okay, I'll give you one," and he does the one take. So we were going to test the movie. We have the line, and I don't like it. It has issues — why would he say that? — but that's the point of a test screening, to test it. If it doesn't work, then we don't do it. Now, let me go back a little bit. When I spoke with [James] Cameron before I wrote the script, he told me about the story

"When Ridley saw *Romulus* he really liked it. But he said, 'You stole my ideas.'"

FEDE ALVAREZ

Right: Close encounters of the uncomfortable kind: Rain (Cailee Spaeny) gets acquainted with a Xenomorph. **Below:** Android Andy (David Jonsson) leads the way.

Below, top to bottom: Tyler (Archie Renaux) gives Rain some weapon-training; Sparks fly; A jaw-some Xenomorph.

when he screened *Aliens* for the first time. There was not a sound in the theatre for most of the movie, and Jim was worried that the movie wasn't working. Then when Sigourney comes out with the power loader and says, "Get away from her, you bitch," the whole theatre exploded. Jim said, "That's when I knew the movie was working." So when I'm doing the test screening, the same experience happened. No-one makes a sound, and I'm concerned that the movie is not working at all. Then Andy says the line, "Get away from her, you bitch," and the whole theatre explodes in a cheer. So I'm like, "I'm fucked. There's no way to try to convince the studio to remove the line that got the biggest cheer." So that's why that line is in the movie.

The film makes *Alien* movies scary again. Has your approach to scaring audiences changed over the years, from your *Evil Dead* reboot through to *Don't Breathe* and now this?
It must have. We forget that we were 12 years old when we saw the originals. Now the challenge is not to scare a 12-year-old. The challenge for me, making this movie, is to scare 40-year-old men. That's a harder thing to do. That's why I go with the pregnancy and the birth. Most 40-year-old men are still scared of birth. In the movie, there's nothing that's not in real life, apart from what comes out, which is an egg. The rest, which really adds to the horror, is her pain and the blood and the screaming. That's normal childbirth. So the themes, I think, are a big part of what makes something truly scary. You have to find what is really universal, what scares people of all ages. There's a science, really, that I'm trying to learn and figure out.

Which is?
The science of the great jump scare. The jump scare that is not cheap, the jump scare that has consequences. It has to stay with you. There's a few in the movie that I'm really proud of. One of my favourites is when Rook grabs Rain's wrist, because once you inject the heart of your audience with that shock of adrenaline, it stays with you quite a bit. This is the science of it. Ready?

Ready.
Okay. First, you have to make the audience focus really hard on the screen. Almost squint at the screen. That can be anything. In this case, it's the flashlight that Navarro is trying for the first time, the X-ray torch. That makes you pay attention. So you're super-focused on the screen at that moment and when you focus, you hold your breath for a second. So you're not breathing. The next beat has to be something that makes you exhale. If you have air in your lungs, the jump scare doesn't hit you. If I'm gonna punch you in the gut, if you're ready for it, it doesn't do anything. So, you have to make people be tense and not breathe for a little bit. Then you need something that makes them relax. In that case it's Cailee [Spaeny, who plays Rain] saying, "I wouldn't touch anything if I were you." It's just a random line, you exhale, and that's when you punch them; that's when Rook's hand comes in. And all I'm doing right there is priming you for what's about to come, which is the Facehugger in the cryo-chamber. That was the big discovery here — prime the audience with a good jump scare, then go into your set-piece and people will feel vulnerable because they think it's going to happen to them again. You feel like you've been hurt, and you don't want it to happen again.

What's next for you? There's talk of a sequel.
The mistake usually with sequels is to make them because you can, and because of the success of *Romulus*, we definitely can make a sequel. But I wouldn't do it unless we have a really good idea for it, something that's worthy of the title. Rodo [Sayagues, co-writer] and I are working on that right now. We're excited about where it can go. We've almost checked all of the boxes of things that I want to see, and brought back a lot of the things I hadn't seen in a while. Wherever we go now, we can go into uncharted waters. And man, I think it'll be so exciting to go with characters you know from this movie, to a place in the *Alien* franchise that we've never been before, and to discover things that you've never seen before. That's exciting to me.

***ALIEN: ROMULUS* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY, DIGITAL AND DISNEY+**

THE EMPIRE MASTERPIECE

Tampopo

JUZO ITAMI'S FEAST FOR YOUR EYES

WORDS **JOHN NUGENT**

DO YOU KNOW how to eat ramen? You might think you have a good idea. But an early scene in the delightful 1985 Japanese classic *Tampopo* might have you questioning everything. In the film's opening ten minutes, bored truck driver Gun (a young, pre-fame Ken Watanabe) is reading a food guide book aloud to his fellow trucker Gorō (Tsutomu Yamazaki). Gun imagines an in-person lesson from the book's author, an elderly food '*sensei*' (Ryūtarō Ōtomo), on the correct rules of ramen engagement. Where do you even begin with the beloved broth? Do you start with the meat, with the soup, with the noodles?

"First, contemplate the ramen," advises the *sensei*. "Carefully observe the entire bowl while savouring the aroma." Then, he counsels, you must "caress" the ramen with your chopsticks, to "express affection". Finally, you must "nudge the pork lovingly", and "quietly apologise to it: 'Until we meet again.'" Then, and only then, can you begin eating, starting with the noodles — but you must never take your eyes off the pork. "Gaze at it with affection," the *sensei* commands.

From this delightful, religiously ritualistic lesson in culinary etiquette onwards, *Tampopo* sets its stall out as the greatest of all food movies. Curiously, it's not a crowded field. There are bafflingly few cinematic odes to gastro-glories — odd, considering how fundamental food is to the human experience. Only *Ratatouille*, *Babette's Feast*, or perhaps *Harold & Kumar Get The Munchies* come close to being as mouth-wateringly appetising as *Tampopo*, and few are as interested in food itself, in a holistic understanding of how we eat, what we eat, and what we think about when we do. More than any other film, it is a film that considers the *physical* act of eating — of what it all feels like to put something tasty in your mouth.

The film's writer-director, Juzo Itami, called it his "ramen Western", a play on the 'spaghetti Westerns' of Sergio Leone and others, and as with the Italian director's work, Itami cross-pollinates the tropes of American cinema and his native country. While there is a whiff of George Stevens' *Shane* in the plot — a mysterious tough guy rides into town to help an innocent homestead — the 'Western' term is slightly misleading: there are no actual cowboys here, no literal guns-at-dawn. Yet there is something of a Clint Eastwood squint or a John Wayne grimace in Gorō, a strong, silent type who incongruously wears a Stetson, and roams the plains of 1980s Tokyo behind the steering wheel of a lorry, rather than the saddle of a horse.

With one foot in a surreal Jacques Tati-esque fantasy, the film follows Gorō as he assists the titular Tampopo (Nobuko Miyamoto, the director's real-life wife) in reviving her late husband's noodle shop, from underwhelming fast-food slop to culinary excellence. Their journey considers every nook and cranny of the ramen bowl, at one point even engaging in a *Rocky*-style training montage. ("Ramen takes stamina!" barks Gorō.) You will learn more than you'd ever think you'd know about this humble dish: the different ingredients that must go into a good broth (it should simmer for three days or more, we learn), or the importance of rolling the noodles three times the night before serving. It was intensive for the cast too, under Itami's obsessive perfectionism: Miyamoto later reported that she developed peritendinitis from repeatedly shaking noodles dry.

That quest for the perfect ramen forms the backbone of the piece. But Itami's interests are too expansive to be contained in one story, the film occasionally diverting to surreal food-based vignettes with characters unrelated to the main plot — a smattering of hors d'oeuvres, if you like, to go along with the main meal. Some of these sequences consider the manners of mealtimes: in one very funny scene, a Japanese etiquette teacher schools her students on the correct technique for eating spaghetti, observing that in the West, slurping — the de facto approach in Japan — is considered rude. Soon, however, when a nearby European begins slurping his pasta, the slurp-floodgates are opened.

Itami seems most interested in the physical act of eating, warts and all. The final shot, of a woman breastfeeding her baby, seems to cement this point, that food is for the body and of the body. Some meals are distinctly unappetising,

Clockwise from main: Noodle bar owner Tampopo (Nobuko Miyamoto) and her son (Mampei Ikeuchi); Ramen time; Things get heated in the kitchen; And also a little bloody; A meal goes awry.

underscoring the violence of carnivory — such as the turtle soup, made with the blood of a real-life soft-shell turtle, killed for real on screen by a professional chef, in perhaps the film's most shocking moment. (Some animals, alas, were definitely harmed in the making of this motion picture.) Elsewhere, a scene where a raw egg yolk passes back and forth between the mouths of two lovers may be among the most oddly erotic non-sex scenes ever committed to screen.

Food and sex are spoken of in the same breath here. They are seemingly considered by Itami one and the same — both pleasures of the flesh. Throughout the film, there is a simmering, unspoken romance between Gorō and Tampopo, finally acknowledged when Tampopo upgrades to shiny new chef whites. The usually fast-talking Gorō is suddenly left speechless, smitten. She looks, he says, "like something out of a French film. I feel like calling you 'Jeanne'."

But ultimately, this is a food film, about food. Perhaps this, more than its international sensibilities, is why it became a rare foreign-language hit in the US and the UK upon release, and continues to be an enduring classic, still Itami's most successful film. Good grub is the universal language, and nowhere else can you witness so much of it, shot so meticulously, so lovingly: *wagyu* steak, delicately wrapped in lettuce; duck pancakes, generously slathered in plum sauce; an *omurice* (a fried-rice omelette), made stealthily by a homeless ex-chef who breaks into a kitchen late at night; red bean soup with *mochi*, the sweet glutinous rice cake beloved by Japanese people. And ramen, more ramen than you could ever contemplate, perfected and tended to with as much care and attention as Itami caresses his own film. That's why the taste of *Tampopo* lingers long in the mouth: like the national dish it celebrates, it is comfort food of the highest order. Gaze at it — as the *sensei* commands — with affection.

***TAMPOPO* IS OUT ON CRITERION COLLECTION BLU-RAY**

Alamy

PICKS OF THE MONTH

CHOSEN BY **CHRIS HEWITT**

1 JUROR #2

(OUT NOW, BR/DIGITAL)

The latest (and last?) film from director Clint Eastwood was mismanaged by Warner Bros., the studio that has been Eastwood's home for half a century. Not given a wide theatrical release, this taut morality play, in which a metaphorical noose tightens around the neck of Nicholas Hoult's compromised juror, deserves to find an audience now.

2 CAPTAIN KRONOS: VAMPIRE HUNTER

(OUT 27 JANUARY, 4K BR)

The first of the Hammer Horror treasures to be given a glossy 4K re-release is one of their oddest, and most fun, entries. The only movie written and directed by Brian Clemens, creator of *The Avengers* (not that one), it follows a swashbuckling hero (a dubbed Horst Janson) who crosses swords with a possibly vampiric family of aristocrats. Stylish and with neat tweaks to traditional vampire lore, it's worth hunting down.

3 CRONOS

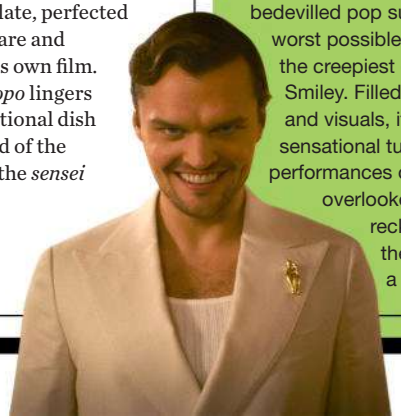
(OUT 10 FEBRUARY, 4K BR)

Another vampire flick worth your time is Guillermo del Toro's gruesome, inventive and darkly beautiful debut film, which feels like a proof of concept for pretty much the rest of his career, right down to the presence of Ron Perlman.

4 SMILE 2

(OUT 20 JANUARY, DVD/BR/DIGITAL)

Parker Finn follows up his sleeper hit of 2022 by turning the screw on Naomi Scott's bedevilled pop superstar, who picks the worst possible time to be pursued by the creepiest demon in movies, Ol' Smiley. Filled with great jump scares and visuals, it also boasts, in Scott's sensational turn, another of the many performances of the year that will be overlooked in the awards reckoning simply because they happen to be in a horror movie.



SPOILER SPECIAL

The Piano Lesson

DIRECTOR MALCOLM WASHINGTON ON PLAYING ALL THE RIGHT NOTES FOR HIS AUGUST WILSON ADAPTATION

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

THE PIANO LESSON — the third of August Wilson's Century Cycle of plays to be adapted for the screen by producer Denzel Washington — is a family affair in more ways than one. It tells the story of a brother and sister (Boy Willie, played by John David Washington, and Berniece, played by Danielle Deadwyler) battling over the fate of a family heirloom, the piano of the title, and struggling with generational grief, guilt, and ghosts literal and metaphorical. But it's also a story that very much brings the Washington family together — as well as John David and Denzel's involvement, it was executive-produced by Katia Washington, and directed by Malcolm, Denzel's youngest son, making his feature debut here. And that sense of connection and family runs throughout the film. Here, Malcolm Washington talks us through its pivotal scenes.

THE KEY(S) MOMENT

The movie begins with a flashback, to the moment when Boy Charles (Stephan James) takes the piano of the title from the home of slave-owner Robert Sutter. It's a visually stunning sequence which takes place under cover of night on Independence Day, the heist swathed in reds and blues of nearby fireworks. "It was important to set up a number of things," says Washington. "This is a film, this is not what you might expect of an August Wilson adaptation. And conceptually, the movie is an American story. It's about a declaration of identity. It starts on the Fourth Of July, red white and blue, with a theft. All of these things are as American as it gets, and it felt like an important way to bring the audience into what our story would be."

'OH BERTA'

As you might expect from a film which has an instrument in its title, music plays a huge part in *The Piano Lesson*. At one point, Erykah Badu shows up for a cameo as a singer in a jazz bar. But one of the most stirring moments comes when Boy Willie, his uncle Doaker (Samuel L. Jackson, who originated the role of Boy Willie on stage in the '80s), Boy Willie's friend Lymon (Ray Fisher) and Wining Boy (Michael Potts) are alone in the house, and begin singing 'Oh Berta', an old work song. Prefiguring something that happens later in the film, it almost feels as if they become possessed. "That was such a wonderful sequence," says Washington. "It was a work song sung at the Mississippi State Penitentiary. The men commune over this song and find kinship over it, and as that sequence changes, it becomes about themselves in the end and their own processing of trauma. All the singing was done live that night, and it was just really spiritual."

THE PIANO LESSON

Halfway through, Doaker recounts the piano's origin story, and how the carvings were created by his grandfather as an act of defiance and commemoration after his wife and son were traded to another slave-owner in exchange for the piano. "It was important to see the stories and see the faces of the people that adorn the piano," says Washington, who took inspiration for the carvings from his own family. "Everything that is on the piano is hearkening to a real person in my life that has affected me in some way," he says. And before you ask, no, Denzel is not on the piano. "No, it's all ancestors that are no longer with us," he laughs.

THE KISS

One of the film's most tender moments comes when Berniece — still mourning the death of her husband, and who has just rejected the advances of Corey Hawkins' suitor, Avery — finds herself in an unexpected clinch with Boy Willie's gentle-giant best friend, Lymon (Fisher). Washington knew it was an important scene — whenever he watched the play, "there was always a vocal audience" at that moment. "We had shot so much with all the actors in the room, and it was so nice to shoot a scene with two people again. We found how we were going to shoot it in the camera test, just floating back and forth between the two of them." And, he's delighted to report, it elicited a similar reaction from audiences who have seen the film. "We played the movie in Atlanta, and you could almost not hear it," he laughs. "It's so cool."

THE EXORCISM

Throughout the movie, there have been hints that the house may be haunted by the vengeful ghost of James Sutter, the recently murdered grandson of Robert Sutter (and it's heavily implied that Boy Willie did the recent murdering). If there was any doubt about that, it's eliminated in the film's spectacular climax, in which the ghost of Sutter returns to attack Boy Willie. To eliminate this spectral threat, Berniece — who has refused to play the piano throughout — sits down and performs an exorcism of sorts, pounding out a discordant melody, augmented by the presence of her ancestors, which eventually sees Sutter off. It's an extraordinarily powerful sequence. "That sequence is a culmination of the themes we've set up in the film," says Washington. "It's a necessary confrontation of this haunting, a confrontation of the past, a confrontation of all these things so that you can work through it and move to the future."

NAME THAT TUNE

"We had a lot of conversations about it," says Washington of the exact piece that Berniece plays. "It wasn't like a musical thing where she's gonna play this beautiful song. It was from the gut, it was an emotional calling to the ancestors, and it needed a dissonance to really be effective. It's like a conjuring. The earth is moving. Each striking of the chords is a call across dimensions." The end result is undeniably moving, if unlikely to threaten the number-one spot in the charts.

HERE ENDETH THE LESSON

Sutter dispelled, a truce is called between Boy Willie and Berniece. The piano stays in Pittsburgh, and Boy Willie returns home. "So much of this is about finding healing, finding peace," says Washington, "and that's why I love the end of the movie, because it's so peaceful." However, in the film's final shot, it is revealed that Boy Willie's grand plan of buying land from the Sutters has been thwarted. "But he's at peace with it. He's gotten something else, which is much greater, which is his connection with his family and his ancestors. And with that, he can go off and do more, hopefully. There'll be another piece of land somewhere."

THE PIANO LESSON **IS ON NETFLIX NOW**

The Ranking

The movies of 1985

ONE YEAR. FOUR *EMPIRE* WRITERS. HUNDREDS OF OPTIONS. ONE DELOREAN REQUIRED?

RUSSELL MOORCROFT

OUR CRITICS

CHRIS HEWITT
Big fan of McFly. Less keen on McBusted.

NICK DE SEMLYEN
Once reunited the Goonies. One-Eyed Willy was barred.

JOHN NUGENT
When it comes down to it, he's a *Brazil* nut.

JAMES DYER
Proudly, and frequently, goes *Commando*.

Chris: Great Scott, it's 1985, a year immortalised in my mind in lurid VHS covers.
James: Although let's be honest, 1985 was not a vintage year. It was less Orwellian than 1984.
Chris: More like Ornotwellian.
James: But there were a few blockbuster staples.
Chris: It was a solid year for people who had muscles. If you were Arnold Schwarzenegger or Sylvester Stallone.
James: *Commando* and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* are two of the most iconic '80s action films. They were the most over the top.
Chris: No, *Over The Top* was 1986.
Nick: I would argue that this is the year of Stallone rather than Arnold. Arnold had *Commando*, and then *Red Sonja*. Stallone had two action classics, both of which made the same amount of money at the box office: $300 million. He dominated that summer.
John: I agree with Nick. Stallone had a better year, but *Commando* is higher on my list. *Rocky* and *First Blood* were quite serious dramas, and by 1985 those series are just absolutely ridiculous. *Rocky IV* has a talking robot.
James: You get whiplash from those films.
Nick: You can smell the '80s. Stallone is wearing fur coats. *Commando* has steel drums.
Chris: I don't love *First Blood Part II*.
James: What the fuck is wrong with you?
Chris: I've watched it a couple of times in recent years and was taken by how joyless it is. Whereas *Commando* is such a gloriously, deliciously camp movie in so many ways that I don't think anyone with a soul can take against it.
John: *Commando* is far more quotable than *Rambo*.
Chris: It was a decent year for action. William Friedkin's *To Live And Die In LA* has one of the great car chases of all time, and one of the great twists of all time.
Nick: It's high on my list, pretty much because of the car chase. It's one of the coolest films of the '80s.
John: I do think it's worth mentioning, as a tonal swerve, Akira Kurosawa's *Ran*. Its absolutely epic, and a beautiful piece of work.
Nick: It's maybe not talked about as much as it would be if Kurosawa had made fewer classics.
Chris: It did get nominated for a couple of Oscars. When you look at the Oscar nominations from that year, it's all just a little bit dull. Best Picture was *Out Of Africa*. Maybe I'm wrong and that movie is a masterpiece, but it's always felt a little like homework.
John: It's got a very good Meryl Streep performance. But it's a film that's more famous now for its score.
Nick: I've seen it a few times. I've got a soft spot for it. It's very old-fashioned. I would have given the Oscar to *Witness*.
Chris: *Witness* is an amazing movie.
Nick: It's got one of my favourite Harrison Ford performances. It's great work by Peter Weir.
John: It feels like a proper, meaty dramatic role for Ford. I wish we'd seen more of that vibe from him.
James: It's that breed of mid-budget thriller you don't really get in cinemas anymore.
Chris: Like *Police Academy 2: Their First Assignment*.
James: When I first saw that, it was my favourite *Police Academy*. I have since realised the error of my ways. But I also remember thinking *Conan The Destroyer* was much better than *Conan The Barbarian*, because kids are stupid.
Chris: It's true. I loved *The Goonies* as a kid. I do not love *The Goonies* now.
James: *The Goonies* is iconic. That doesn't necessarily make it a good film.
Nick: There's a lot of shouting. But it's so fun: booby traps and pirate treasure!
John: I never grew up with it. I tried watching it as a grown-up and was like, "What is this?"
Chris: The great Steven Spielberg-produced movie of that year has got to be *Back To The Future*, right? I'll be very, very surprised if this isn't our number one.
James: It's no *Commando*. But it's a great film.
Nick: The script is unbelievable. It's like a Swiss watch, and the casting is perfect. Sorry, Eric Stoltz.
Chris: It would have been a disaster with Eric Stoltz, I'm convinced of it.
Nick: It's such a brilliant high-school movie on top of everything else. It's three different genres mashed into one, and it does each of them to perfection.
Chris: It's the best Robert

Portraits: Marco Vittur

Zemeckis movie, the best Michael J. Fox movie. Marty is the rare teen protagonist you don't want to punch. He's so likeable, so relatable. I thought he was the coolest man alive.
Nick: The clock-tower sequence is a proper nail-biter still. For me, it's one of two great sci-fi movies of 1985.
Chris: What's the other one? Don't say *Weird Science*.
Nick: *Brazil*. Terry Gilliam created this horrific vision of the future, and made Michael Palin into a proper bastard. There's so much I love about this film. It shouldn't work. It should be a mess, but it's not.
Chris: I don't love *Brazil*. I admire it.
John: It's very high on my list. It's the best thing Gilliam ever made. It feels like the distillation of his talents as a director. It's so strange and ambitious and melancholic.
Chris: There were other bold swings from auteurs that year. I'm going to throw Scorsese's *After Hours* and John Landis' *Into The Night* into the mix.
Nick: They would make a great double bill. They're both about a strange, lonely guy who's thrown into a series of adventures over the course of one night.
Chris: Ooh, I'm going to do that. What a great idea.
Nick: *After Hours* is not one of my favourite Scorseses.
Chris: I think it's terrific. John Hughes also had a good year, though.
James: *Weird Science* is objectively not that good a film, but it's a film I have a great deal of affection for.
Nick: *The Breakfast Club* has endured. Though some of it has not dated well.
James: It hasn't aged brilliantly. But it has a lot to say about the various high-school archetypes and roles that people fit into, and sometimes are forced into.
John: It's iconic. It's almost what you think about when you think about the 1980s.
Chris: 1985 was a great year for horror. You've got Dan O'Bannon's *The Return Of The Living Dead*, a wonderful parody-slash-homage to the George Romero zombie movies, which came out the same year as Romero's *Day Of The Dead*. You've got *Re-Animator*, and *Fright Night*, which may be my favourite vampire movie.
John: I'm a big fan of *Re-Animator*. *Day Of The Dead* doesn't linger in my memory like the other two.
Chris: You don't love Bub, the sentient zombie who starts to get his memories back?
John: Unlike Bub, I've forgotten.
Chris: I love *Day Of The Dead*. It's very talky, but has some of the best zombie effects ever seen. It's probably my favourite of the original Romero trilogy.
James: The only two horrors I watched in 1985 were *A Nightmare On Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge*, and *Ghoulies*, which I rented solely because of the video box.
Chris: *Freddy's Revenge* is now seen as a seminal moment in queer horror. I don't think the director was necessarily aware of the subtext. And that's also there in *Fright Night*, which is just a terrific film.
James: Speaking of iconic VHS covers, I remember that one genuinely frightened me as a child in the video store.
Chris: Right, enough squabbling. Let's vote!

In an unprecedented move, we bring you an excerpt of the post-vote exchange after we realised that, somehow, Commando *wound up as our choice for the second-greatest movie of 1985:*

Nick: We're gonna have to do a recount. This is gonna have to be a recount.
Chris: We are all culpable. Each of us must pay the piper in his own way.
James: Remember, *Commando*, when I said I would put you last? I lied.
Chris: This list is a sham. This Ranking is a disgrace. I reject it, even though I was part of it.
Nick: This is truly The John Matrix Revolutions.
James: I put it to you that there is no film more enjoyable on this list.
Nick: I am appalled to be a part of this. I'm going to deny being in this room.
John: Can we use pseudonyms?
Chris: Great Scott!

AGREE? DISAGREE?
WRITE IN AND TELL US AT:
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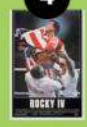
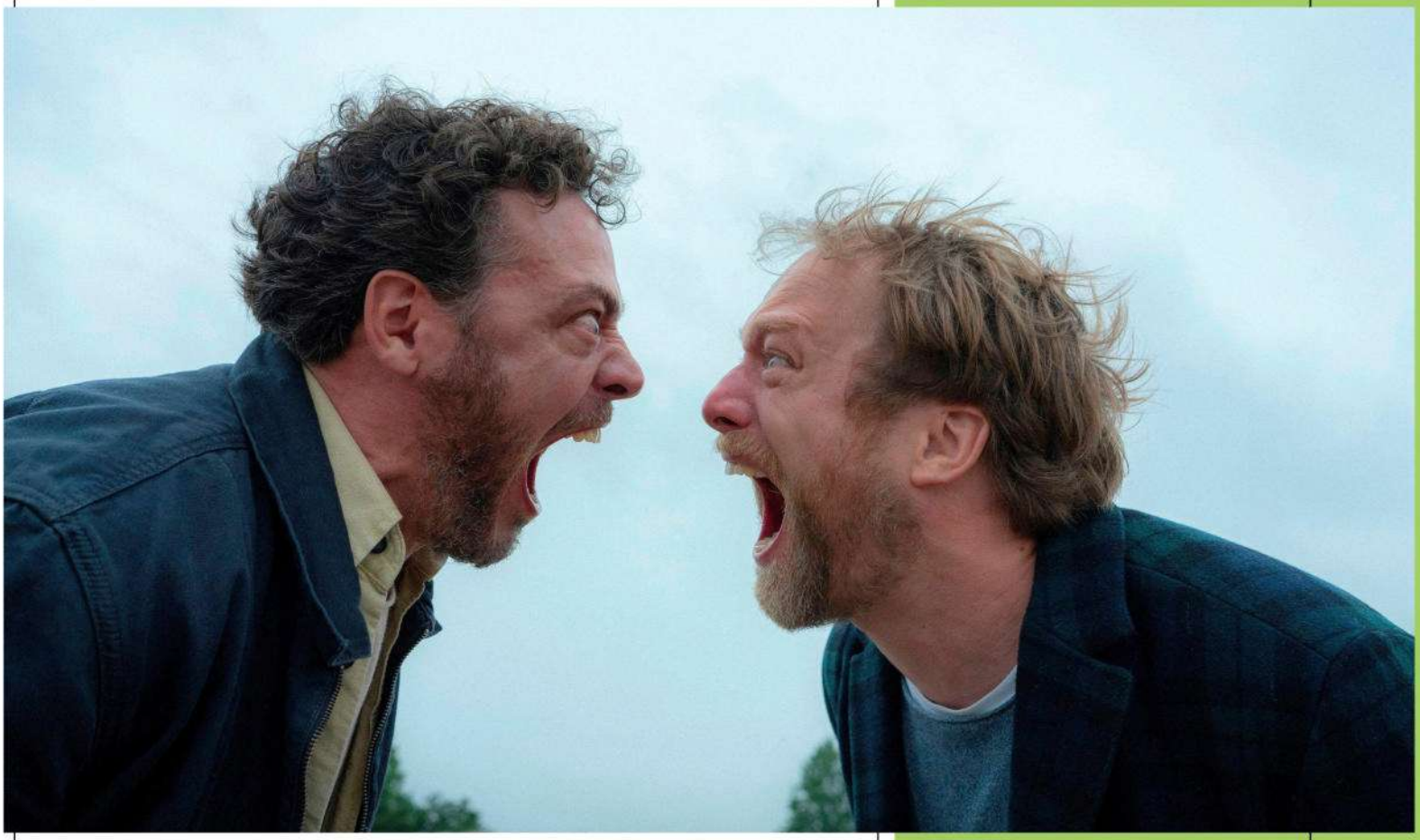
THE TOP TEN

1.
BACK TO THE FUTURE
2.
COMMANDO
3.
BRAZIL
4. 
ROCKY IV
5.
WITNESS
6.
TO LIVE AND DIE IN L.A.
7.
DAY OF THE DEAD
8.
FRIGHT NIGHT
9.
RAMBO: FIRST BLOOD PART II
10=.
INTO THE NIGHT/ THE BREAKFAST CLUB



Doublespeak

DIRECTORS CHRISTIAN TAFDRUP AND JAMES WATKINS TALK TO *EMPIRE* ABOUT THEIR VERSIONS OF BRUTAL HORROR **SPEAK NO EVIL**

WORDS **ALEX GODFREY**

"HEY, CHRISTIAN!"

James Watkins, sitting in an office with a whiteboard of ideas behind him, beams through the screen. "Hey, James," responds Christian Tafdrup, Zooming in from his phone, pacing around his Copenhagen apartment. What's this? The director of *Speak No Evil* (2022) having a jolly old chinwag with the director of *Speak No Evil* (2024)? Have timelines clashed? Is the Danish filmmaker not incensed that Blumhouse remade his film but two years later? Why the hell are these guys being so damn *friendly*?

Blame *Empire*. Having loved *both* films, we took a shot at getting them together for a joint autopsy. Turns out they've been mutual admirers for some time. "We're both drawn to this sort of material," reasons Watkins. Sickos.

In Tafdrup's unremittingly bleak *Speak No Evil* (native title: *Gæsterne*, meaning 'The Guests'), Danish couple Bjørn (Morten Burian) and Louise (Sidsel Siem Koch) meet Dutch couple Patrick (Fedja van Huêt) and Karin (Karina Smulders) on holiday, and when they're invited to stay at their home a few months later, it transpires that their hosts are systematic killers. It ends... badly.

Tafdrup was inspired by a real experience he and his family had, having been invited to stay with a Dutch couple after meeting them on holiday in Tuscany. "[Danish people] are very similar to the Dutch, but [the Dutch] are just a little bit more creepy in general," he says. "And I had that feeling with this Dutch couple as well. Something was just not right." He declined the invitation, but started thinking about what it might be like, taken to a diabolical degree. "I wrote it with my brother. We said, 'Let's make the most disturbing film in Danish film history ever.'" Watkins grins. "I thought the film was fantastic," he says.

A week after it was released, Blumhouse contacted Tafdrup, telling him they wanted to remake it for a wider audience. Tafdrup was curious to see how the hell they might do that. Watkins, meanwhile, having been offered the gig, was excited. "I thought I could slightly shift the DNA in a way that I thought was interesting," he says. He wanted to set it in the UK, and give it its own cultural specificity, "leaning into the Brits and the Americans and how they interact". And Tafdrup was pleased when he heard who got the job — Watkins' *Eden Lake* had been a touchpoint for *Speak No Evil*. "We were looking at who else had made disturbing films with a disturbing

Facing page: Christian Tafdrup's 2022 *Gæsterne/ Speak No Evil.* **Bottom:** Tafdrup on set. **This page:** James Watkins' 2024 remake, *Speak No Evil*. **Bottom:** Watkins chatting with James McAvoy between shots.

Alamy, Nordisk Film, Universal

ending, so *Eden Lake* was such an inspiration for us," he says. "So [James] made perfect sense."

Watkins began work on script drafts, which Tafdrup sent notes on, but mostly he stayed out of the way. And Watkins soon changed things up, notably with the main antagonist. In the original film, van Huêt's Patrick is a cold, mannered intellectual. "For us, Patrick was the devil," explains Tafdrup. "He was not a criminal, he didn't want something concrete out of them. We wanted him to be like the picture of evilness in the world. And Fedja really liked that — he played him as a demon who was just very good at playing human." Watkins' Paddy, played gleefully by an overbearing, boarish James McAvoy, is different.

"I was thinking of Falstaff and those kind of British characters," says Watkins of the new take. "There's a kind of cliché that the Brits are repressed and the Americans are much more open, but there are these Brits who are 'Hail fellow well met' in the pub, and I wanted to lean into that." Watkins also gave visiting American couple Ben (Scoot McNairy) and Louise (Mackenzie Davis) a relationship problem: she's been caught sexting, and their fissure gives Paddy ammunition. "Paddy has this whole thing about honesty," says Watkins. "It's a narrative that demagogues use: "I'm the authentic voice in the world."

The most significant change, though, is what happens in Watkins' third act. Tafdrup's film concludes shockingly, with Patrick and Karin cutting off their guests' daughter's tongue and carting her away; the parents put up a fight but lose, and are left at the end of their rope, spiritually battered. "Why are you doing this to us?" they ask. "Because you let us," they are told, and then Patrick and Karin stone them to death. The end. "I was working with the idea that maybe we don't know violence in our part of society," says Tafdrup. "So what do we do when we suddenly meet it? We freeze, we don't do anything. That was the provocative statement."

After the same exchange (*sans* tongue-cut) in Watkins' film, Ben and Louise decide to *not* let Paddy and Ciara (Aisling Franciosi) do it to them any longer, and put up one hell of a fight, resulting in an almighty home-invasion sequence. "I wanted to shift it into a different place," says Watkins. "It's no longer the rules of polite society. Also, I wanted to track some of the narratives of masculinity, and Ben's notion of how a man should behave, and realising that that's a nonsense. It's actually Louise who's the alpha here." The good guys win, but not without a cost: the final shot pictures young Ant (Dan Hough) psychologically broken after bludgeoning Paddy, his tormentor and mutilator, to death. "I did this a bit in *Eden Lake*: 'Are you really celebrating this?'", Watkins explains. Still, his version is much more of a thrill-ride than Tafdrup's *immense* downer.

Tafdrup went to the New York premiere of the remake. "Compared to my film, this was much more enjoyable," he laughs. "People were screaming, clapping, laughing, and we could have a party afterwards. At my premiere, people couldn't get up off their seats at the end. We had a party that was not even a party, because people went home. But I loved that the same premise can provide both [experiences]. This is amazing."

Watkins nods, smiling. "I love that the two films are in conversation," he says. We love that the two filmmakers were in conversation, too. And not an evil word was spoken.

SPEAK NO EVIL **(2022) IS OUT NOW ON ON DVD AND SHUDDER.**

SPEAK NO EVIL **(2024) IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL**

UK, ROI and Channel Islands residents aged 16+ only. Minimum 3 month subscription. Contract automatically continues after minimum term and monthly charges apply unless and until cancelled. 3D, IMAX, 4DX, ScreenX and premium seating uplifts payable where applicable. 3D glasses and special screenings excluded although Unlimited members can get up to 50% off selected Event Cinema. Monthly price varies depending on Unlimited Membership Group. Compatible mobile/smart device required. Terms and exclusions apply, see cineworld.com/terms/unlimited-card

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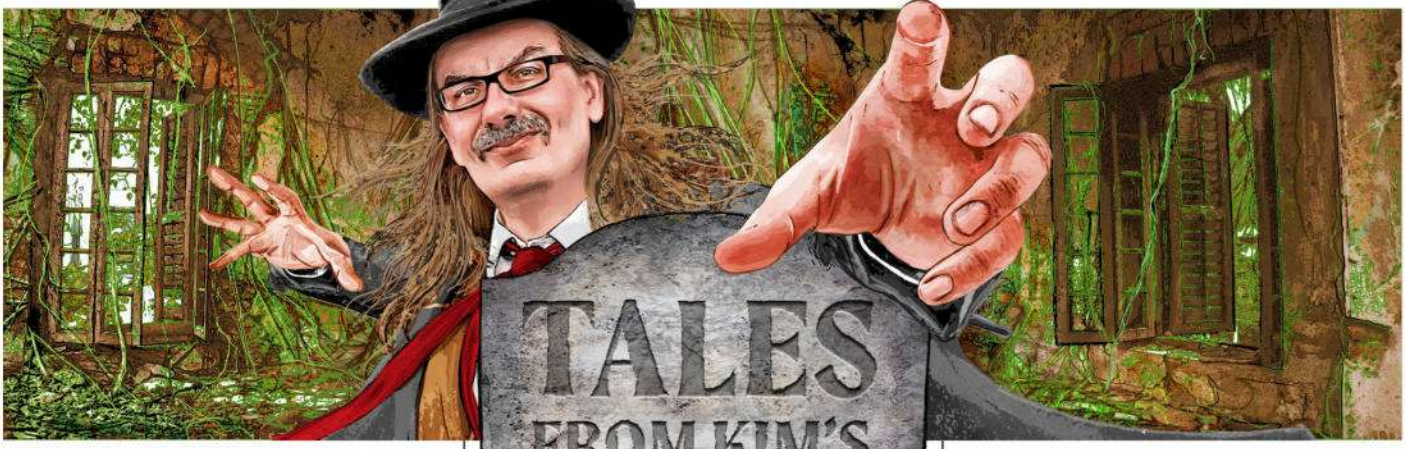


TALES FROM KIM'S CRYPT

LEGENDARY AUTHOR AND CRITIC KIM NEWMAN BRINGS US HIS UNIQUE TAKES ON CULT CINEMA

MATTHEW BRAZIER

THIS MONTH

NOW 100 YEARS OLD...

GOING FORWARD, EVERY year will be the centenary of a raft of significant films. Here are the key titles due for revival/celebration/re-evaluation in 2025...

• The top box-office/critical smash of 1925 was King Vidor's *The Big Parade* — one of the first films to revisit the generational trauma of the previous decade and recreate the large-scale horrors of the First World War, as experienced by everyman American soldier John Gilbert. Vidor had to overcome studio scepticism — surely no-one wanted to be reminded of the trenches just seven years after they had got home! — to get this made, but it was a monster hit, the model for blockbuster war movies for the next 100 years.

• The actual monster of the year was Lon Chaney's iconic, skull-faced *The Phantom Of The Opera* (Chaney's Phantom and Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp are to date the only 1925 movie characters that have been reproduced as Funko Pops). A lavish, gothic melodrama based on the Gaston Leroux novel, this remains much-remade and imitated. In truth, the film is kind of a mess in any extant version (there are a lot), but Chaney's performance is magnificent. Inter-title of the year: "You are dancing on the tombs of tortured men!"

• Dinosaurs created by innovative special effects astonished audiences in *The Lost World*, based on the Arthur Conan Doyle novel. A finale in which a Brontosaurus rampages through London is a sketch for every city-smashing *kaiju* of the King Kong and Godzilla variety.

• Comedy knockouts of the year were Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* — perhaps his best 'Little Tramp' feature — and the Harold Lloyd slapstick vehicle *The Freshman*.

• *Ben-Hur: A Tale Of The Christ* had been a blockbuster book and colossal stage show — yes, with chariot-race — but needed the big screen to do justice to its exercise in New Testament fan fiction. Ramon Novarro became the shirt-off male pin-up of the year as the suffering Christian.

• Meanwhile, in the Soviet Union, Sergei Eisenstein directed *Battleship Potemkin* — the arthouse sensation of 1925 in countries where it wasn't banned — a stirring recreation of an abortive uprising in the Black Sea fleet made to commemorate the incident's 20th anniversary. While *Ben-Hur* relies on spectacle for its chariot race thrills, *Potemkin* excites and horrifies through montage (rapid editing). Its standout sequence — troops assaulting protesters on the Odessa Steps — has been as often referenced, imitated, studied and parodied as the shower scene in *Psycho*.

• Which brings us to One Hundred Years Of Hitch. Twenty-six-year-old Alfred Hitchcock went to Italy and Germany to make his first feature, a romantic melodrama about chorus girls called *The Pleasure Garden*. It's a saucy backstage tale along *All About Eve/Showgirls* lines, but finds room for the first mad killer in a Hitchcock movie. The verdict of the American trade press was "sex picture wholly unsuitable for the exhibitor who aims to show good clean entertainment". That probably delighted the director, who remained fascinated with blondes and the men who murder them for the rest of his career.

Top to bottom: Lon Chaney horrifies in *The Phantom Of The Opera*; A Brontosaurus attacks London in *The Lost World*.

Imago

CRYPT KEEPERS KIM'S PICK OF THE WEIRD AND WONDERFUL

ALL YOU NEED IS DEATH
(DIGITAL)

This unconventional horror sees slightly unethical musicologists Simone Collins and Charlie Maher coax Olwen Fouéré into performing a terrifying ancient song, unleashing evil. Irish writer-director Paul Duane uncannily explores the connection between folk horror and folk music.

APARTMENT 7A
(DIGITAL)

A *Rosemary's Baby* prequel with Julia Garner as that woman who falls out of a window in the first reel of the 1968 film. Given you know the ending, *Relic* director/writer Natalie Erika James makes a fair fist of the 1965-set creepiness. Garner is good, and Dianne Wiest gives a great Ruth Gordon.

AZRAEL: ANGEL OF DEATH
(DIGITAL)

E.L. Katz follows his buzzy, chatty *Cheap Thrills* with a non-verbal post-apocalypse movie built around bloodied angel Samara Weaving, continuing her streak of the oddest horror roles on offer. Years after the Rapture, Weaving battles evil (or are they?) townsfolk in an Estonian forest.

BEEZEL
(DIGITAL)

From the 1960s to the 2020s, a succession of people bring recording equipment to a haunted house and record their disturbing experiences. Aaron Fradkin's episodic shocker channels the creep factor of the non-narrative hit *Skinamarink* to create something approaching a conventional scare story.

DEPARTING SENIORS
(DIGITAL)

Clare Cooney's smart, swift next-gen slasher satire riffs on *Scream* and Stephen King. A masked murderer offs mean kids during the last weeks of school and a bullied protagonist develops psychic abilities which are only half-helpful in tackling the killing spree.

STORY OF THE SHOT

The Sound Of Music

HOW THOSE HILLS CAME ALIVE

WORDS **IAN FREER**

THE ORIGINS

ROBERT WISE'S 1965 *The Sound Of Music* begins with debatably the most famous opening number in movie-musical history. A helicopter shot glides over the Austrian Alps, zeroing in on problematic postulant Maria Rainer (Julie Andrews) twirling around in high grass, then belting out, "The hills are alive..." (you know the rest). Completely cinematic, it was only made possible by a number of bold choices coalescing into movie magic.

The first saw screenwriter Ernest Lehman shuffling the order of the first two songs. The Richard Rodgers-Oscar Hammerstein stage musical began with nuns chanting, "*Dixit dominus*," before segueing into Maria singing the title tune sitting on a tree branch. Lehman's switcheroo not only started the picture on a more upbeat note, but Wise's staging — an overhead angle he worried just repeated his *West Side Story* opening — also made it feel expansive, underlining Maria's carefree attitude.

THE SHOOT

The sequence began filming on 28 June 1964 at Mehlweg mountain, ten kilometres into Bavaria. Just getting to the location was a challenge. Rain washed away the roads, meaning ox-drawn carts, rather than jeeps, became the mode of transport of choice. To capture Maria's big moment, Brit cameraman Paul Beeson hung from the outside of a helicopter, secured only by straps to avoid the aircraft casting a shadow (he did the shot sporting a jacket and tie — this was the '60s). The first takes were spoiled when Andrews couldn't hear Wise's cues over the sound of the rotors. For later takes, choreographer Marc Breaux would hide in the trees and shout, "Go!" through a bullhorn.

There were other challenges too. "The downdraft from the engines would just knock me flat into the grass," Andrews told *Vanity Fair* in 2002. "Finally, I signalled to the pilot: 'Could you go wider?' And all I got was a thumbs-up and, 'Let's go through it again.'"

To make the effect work, some massaging

Getty Images, Imago, Netflix

was still needed in the edit. "If you watch the film, as I turn the film cuts to a close-up," Andrews said. "It looks so seamless. But it was that turn that was being captured by the helicopter. And the next thing I knew — there I was in the grass."

THE LEGACY

The moment later made number ten in the American Film Institute's *100 Years 100 Songs* celebration and has been lampooned in everything from *The Goodies* to *Paddington In Peru*. But, despite the numerous *Sound Of Music* tours around Salzburg, it is not possible to recreate it, as the iconic meadow lies on private land. Turns out you can't climb every mountain, after all.

THE SOUND OF MUSIC **IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL**

INSTANT TRIVIA

1

Despite being shot in summer, it was still incredibly cold. "I remember coming out to sing 'The hills are alive…' and shivering in my shoes," recalled Andrews.

2

To keep spirits up on the hillside, Andrews and the crew formed musical group The Vocalzones and sang songs including 'Hawaiian War Chant' and 'Indian Love Call'.

3

Choosing the location, Wise picked a huge field of hay and grass, instructing the farmer not to mow. When the unit returned, the pasture had been shorn, leaving just short stalks of grass.

4

The helicopter was so expensive it was only rented for a day and, after filming 'The Sound Of Music', flew off to shoot the von Trapp family's escape over the Alps.

Main: Julie Andrews, frankly brimming with the sound of music. **Right:** Marc Wootton.

SPECIAL THANKS TO...

MARC WOOTTON

THAT CHRISTMAS DIRECTOR SIMON OTTO ON HOW HE LOST SOME OF HIS VOICE CAST

THERE ARE PLENTY of big-name actors in *That Christmas*, the charming animated festive movie co-written by national treasure and one-man Christmas-content-generator Richard Curtis. There's Bill Nighy (of course). Jodie Whittaker. Katherine Parkinson. Rhys Darby. And, as Santa Claus, Brian Cox.

But when you get to the 'Special Thanks' section of the credits, a few more actorly names stand out. There's George Costigan, the 'Bob' in *Rita, Sue And Bob Too*. Amina Zia. Rebekah Staton. And Marc Wootton, the man who was Mr Poppy in the *Nativity!* trilogy. All of whom, according to *That Christmas*' director Simon Otto, played a pivotal role in getting the film underway. "After we had a full first draft, we really wanted to test it," says Otto. "We did a table read, and we had about 30 actors who performed the script once through, and we recorded it, and that was the basis of our first editorial cut. We used it to create a radio play and storyboard to it."

Some who were at that table read, like Rosie Cavaliero and Paul Kaye, wound up making it into the finished movie. "Paul played about three voices, and we loved his Yirrell, so we kept them on," explains Otto. "Others, we changed for multiple reasons. Sometimes, it was the wrong accent or just not quite the right fit." Wootton, who also provided a voice for *Arthur Christmas* and could therefore be considered Christmas-movie royalty, didn't make it, sadly, despite providing a number of scratch (temporary) voices, including Mr McNutt, the character ultimately voiced by Rhys Darby. "He was such a player," says Otto. "He came in a few times. He would say, 'I'll just pop by and give you scratch voices!'"

And while it didn't work out for Wootton & co., Otto is indebted to them and so they live on in the Special Thanks. "They helped us a great deal," he says. There's no greater gift than that. Well, maybe apart from actually being in it.

CHRIS HEWITT

THAT CHRISTMAS **IS ON NETFLIX NOW**

Time Capsule

Colm Meaney

THE PROLIFIC IRISH ACTOR ON THE IMAGES OF HIS CAREER

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

"YOU HAVEN'T PICKED a dud yet," laughs Colm Meaney, halfway through his Time Capsule experience. "You haven't picked something where I've went, 'Oh my God, no!'" When you've made as many films and television shows as the 71-year-old Irish actor has in his career (almost 150, as it happens), it stands to reason that there might be the odd dud. But there's also been a string of crackers, from stints on not one but two seminal *Star Trek* shows to this month's charming, Paul Reiser-penned, Irish-set comedy *The Problem With People*, all of which benefit from Meaney's assured presence. So, then, let the dud-free detour down memory lane commence.

FIRST MEETING
THE PROBLEM WITH PEOPLE (2023)

"This is the moment in the film where Paul (*who also co-stars*) and I first meet, but it was probably midway through the shoot. It reminded me of when I did first meet Paul, because we'd been in touch for nearly two-and-a-half years, but never actually met until the first week of shooting. And we arranged to meet in the Westbury Hotel in Dublin and he said, 'I'll see you in the lounge.' Which to me is the bar. So he's sitting out there thinking, 'This fucker's not going to show up,' and I'm sitting at the bar thinking, 'This is very Hollywood, showing up fashionably late.' And this picture reminds me of that."

TENSE MEETING
THE JOURNEY (2016)

"I have very fond memories of *The Journey*. [Martin] McGuinness and [Ian] Paisley were very interesting, complex people, and working with Tim [Timothy Spall, as Paisley] was such a treat. I'm very much of the Republican persuasion, but there was a moment where we wander into a church, and he spots this stained-glass window and has a speech about Protestant martyrs going back to the 1600s. It was extraordinary. It was so powerful that both me and me as McGuinness were totally taken in by it."

WAITING TO DIE
GANGS OF LONDON (2020)

"This series, so many people talk to me about it like I was a major character. In the first scene I died. I was shot in the face. But they did pay me quite well, so it was alright. And there's a few flashback scenes that explain a lot. Here, I think we'd done a take, and Gareth [Evans, show co-creator] was showing it to me. He was always very proud of the gore and violence. He brought me in and said, 'Let me show you what we shot yesterday,' and it was just endless violence, blood spurting everywhere. He was so happy."

Alamy, Beacon Communications/David Appleby, CBS, Imago, Kaleidoscope

CAKE KNIFE
LAYER CAKE (2004)

"In this scene, I'm just making a point about what needs to be done, what needs to be sorted out. It's not a threatening gesture. Later on, I do beat the shit out of Daniel [Craig], and bounce his head off the freezer and things like that. But the knife just happens to be in my hand. Daniel was at a very interesting point in his career. He was getting offers about bigger things and was in a kind of dilemma about what to do. This was the picture that got Bond for him. He did his little Bond audition, almost, in the room where I show him all my weapons, and he does a little Bond thing. Very fond memories of that shoot."

CLOUGH V. REVIE
THE DAMNED UNITED (2009)

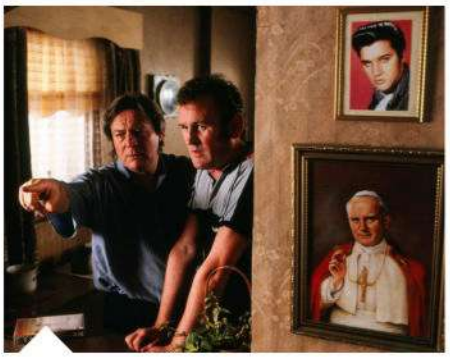
"This happened, right after [Leeds United manager Brian] Clough was sacked. The set was exactly as it had been in the Yorkshire Television studios when they did the real thing. Michael [Sheen] nailed Clough so well. I had a wonderful dialect coach, Joan Washington. The other thing that really gave me the character was the wonderful hair and make-up lady. She had a bunch of hair-pieces looking like dead animals, and she threw this thing on my head and swept it over on one side, and suddenly that was him. An external thing like that can really unlock a door."

MEETING KIRK
STAR TREK: DEEP SPACE NINE (1993)

"This (*'Trials & Tribble-ations', a crossover episode in which* Deep Space Nine *met the original* Trek) was great. *The Next Generation* and *Deep Space Nine* were very different to the original show. Everything had advanced so much. You can see the uniforms there are a bit on the tatty side, whereas [for] *Deep Space Nine*, we had very tailored, smart uniforms. But it was so great to go back and make the connection. There were stand-ins for Jimmy Doohan [Scotty] and Kirk and Chekov, and the lines were read off-camera, and we responded. I look very fondly on [*Star Trek*]. The standard of writing was very high. We were churning out 26 episodes a year, and the quality and variety was phenomenal. I wasn't terribly fond of science-fiction before, and it gave me a real appreciation for how it can comment on the present day."

TOTAL WRITE-OFF
CON AIR (1997)

"This was my fucking spectacular car, and look what they've done to it. I've got the licence plate in my hands. 'AZZ KIKR'. What an idiot Agent Malloy was. They had three different versions of the car, and a fibreglass mock-up that went up with the helicopter, and obviously one that was not in very good condition. I drove the best one. Man, it was lovely. I took it out a few times: we were shooting up on the Utah-Nevada border, right on the state line, and I could take it out on the salt flats, which are just completely flat and straight. I got it up to 160 to 170 miles per hour."



REMEMBERING ALAN
THE COMMITMENTS (1991)

"Oh, wow. Dear old Alan Parker. I was at his memorial last year in the Savoy, and the turnout was extraordinary. Alan was such a genius. He hired me for *Come See The Paradise*, and while we were doing that film he told me about a book he'd got the rights for, which hadn't been published yet, called *The Commitments*. And within six months we started shooting. I hadn't worked in Ireland in ten years, and that brought me back. From then I started doing a picture every year or two in Ireland, and the two other books in the Barrytown Trilogy [*The Snapper* and *The Van*] came from that as well. But Alan, I loved him. He was extraordinary."

THE PROBLEM WITH PEOPLE **IS OUT NOW ON DVD AND DIGITAL**

The Ultimate Empire Quiz

EVERY MONTH, WE WILL TEST YOUR MOVIE KNOWLEDGE. ARE YOU READY?

THIS MONTH

HAMMER HORROR

1 Who played the Count in *The Legend Of The 7 Golden Vampires*?

2 Which actor played Frankenstein's Monster in 1970's *The Horror Of Frankenstein* and 1974's *Frankenstein And The Monster From Hell*?

3 *The Horror Of Frankenstein* was written and directed by a long-running Hammer stalwart. What was his name?

4 Which film is missing from this run of Christopher Lee Dracula movies? *Dracula*, *Dracula: Prince Of Darkness*, XX, *Taste The Blood Of Dracula*, *Scars Of Dracula*, *Dracula A.D. 1972*, *The Satanic Rites Of Dracula*.

5 In which of those movies does Christopher Lee not say a single word?

6 Hammer made an immediate sequel to *Dracula*. What was it called?

7 What title is missing from this run of Peter Cushing Frankenstein movies? *The Curse Of Frankenstein*, *The Revenge Of Frankenstein*, *The Evil Of Frankenstein*, *Frankenstein Created Woman*, XX, *Frankenstein And The Monster From Hell*.

8 Which acclaimed director called the shots on the obscure Hammer title *The Damned*?

9 *The Devil Rides Out* and *To The Devil A Daughter* are both based on books by whom?

10 What is the name of the legendary composer who worked on most of Hammer's seminal works, including *Dracula*?

11 Which future acting legend played the title character in *The Curse Of The Werewolf*?

12 What is the name of the fictional London Underground station where much of the action of *Quatermass And The Pit* takes place?

13 Which American actor starred in the title role in Hammer's first two *Quatermass* films?

14 She starred in *The Shadow Of The Cat* as Beth, *The Gorgon* as Carla, *Dracula: Prince Of Darkness* as Helen, *Rasputin: The Mad Monk* as Sonia, and *Quatermass And The Pit* as Barbara Judd. Who is she?

15 Long-serving Hammer producer Anthony Hinds also wrote a number of screenplays for the company, under which pseudonym?

16. What was the name of the studios that became synonymous with Hammer productions, until the company left in 1966?

17. Terence Fisher directed more films for Hammer than anyone. What was his last?

18 *Captain Kronos — Vampire Hunter* marked the sole directorial effort of the man who created *The Avengers* and *The Professionals*. Who was he?

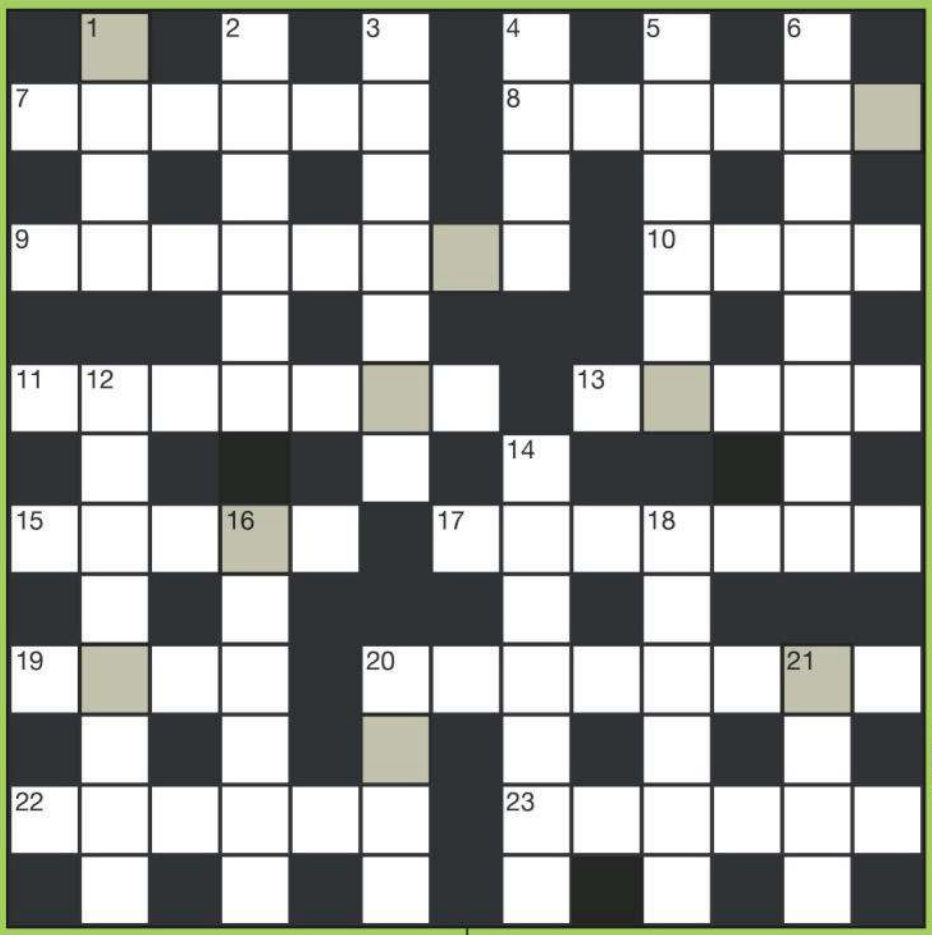
19 Ingrid Pitt starred in *The Vampire Lovers*. What was the name of her character?

20 If Ralph Bates is Dr Jekyll, then who is Sister Hyde in that 1971 movie?

ANSWERS 1. John Forbes-Robertson (bonus point if you know that David de Keyser provided Dracula's voice) **2.** David Prowse, aka Darth Vader **3.** Jimmy Sangster **4.** *Dracula Has Risen From The Grave* **5.** *Dracula: Prince Of Darkness* **6.** *The Brides Of Dracula* **7.** *Frankenstein Must Be Destroyed* **8.** Joseph Losey **9.** Dennis Wheatley **10.** James Bernard **11.** Oliver Reed **12.** Hobbs End **13.** Brian Donlevy **14.** Barbara Shelley **15.** John Elder **16.** Bray Studios **17.** *Frankenstein And The Monster From Hell* **18.** Brian Clemens **19.** Mircalla/Carmilla/Marcilla (bonus point if you can name all these aliases she adopts during the movie) **20.** Martine Beswick

Imago

CROSSWORD



ACROSS

7 — *Blues* (Matthew Broderick film) (6)
8 *A Real Pain*'s Culkin (6)
9 Movie subgenre that includes *Lethal Weapon*, *48 Hrs.* and *The Heat* (5,3)
10 One thousand feet of film (4)
11 Also known as Erik Lehnsherr (7)
13 See **2 Down**
15 It can follow *Day*, *Swing* and *Graveyard* in movie titles (5)
17 Chris Columbus comedy-drama with Julia Roberts and Susan Sarandon (7)
19 Kate Winslet in *The Holiday*, and also Kate Winslet in an eponymous drama (4)
20 Film with a photographer named Lee, but not Kate Winslet in an eponymous drama (5,3)
22 His name is Whitaker (6)
23 Andrew, who wrote *The Truman Show* and directed *Gattaca* and **21 Down** (6)

DOWN

1 "Vengeance is golden" declared the tagline of this Finnish actioner (4)
2/13 Across Filmmaker who founded the company Monkeypaw Productions (6,5)
3 It's the place where John Hartigan, Ava Lord and Marv all live (3,4)
4 Acclaimed sound editor, mixer and designer Lievsay (4)
5 Guy who's in *The Brutalist* (6)
6 It links scenes in *Napoleon*, *The Bourne Ultimatum* and *Mamma Mia!* (8)
12 William, from *Ghostbusters* and *Die Hard* (8)
14 See **16 Down**
16/14 Down Actor who's had roles in *Short Circuit*, *Succession* and *In The Grey* (6,7)
18 — *Story* (Jackie Chan movie) (6)
20 Censorship, or transitions between shots (4)
21 Dystopian thriller starring Clive Owen and Amanda Seyfried (4)

COMPETITION

WIN!

PROP REPLICAS FROM *WICKED*

SO HOW MANY times have you seen *Wicked* now? Two? Three? 20? Directed by Jon M. Chu, it's the untold story of the witches of Oz, and was the hottest ticket of the season — and now it's available to buy or rent at home. To celebrate, we have a very special prize for one winner — a not-available-in-the-shops collection of Oz-branded replica coins, as featured in the movie: truly a money-can't-buy memento for fans to treasure. To enter, crack the crossword, solve the anagram, and follow the instructions below.

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COMPETITION ENDS 10 FEBRUARY

HOW TO ENTER Take the letters from each coloured square and rearrange them to form the name of an actor, director or character. Visit www.empireonline.com/crossword and fill out the form, along with your answer, in the provided field. Entry is free and closes at midnight on 10 February. Winners are selected at random. See below for terms and conditions.

FEBRUARY'S ANSWERS **ACROSS:** **1** Maverick, **7** Green, **8** Chris, **9** Swedish, **10** Aria, **12** Tombstone, **16** Cat People, **19** Demi, **20** Kinnear, **23** Ennio, **24** Count, **25** By The Sea. **DOWN:** **1** Mechanic, **2** Virgil, **3** Rush, **4** Cats, **5** Credits, **6** Person, **11** Jojo, **13** Bolt, **14** Espinosa, **15** Opening, **17** Alison, **18** Dennis, **21** Rory, **22** Seth. **ANAGRAM:** SIMON PEGG

TERMS AND CONDITIONS: One entry per person. Entries are free. Entries must be received before 11 February or will not be valid. The Competition is only open to people aged 18 and over who live in the United Kingdom and are not a Bauer employee or their immediate family. One winner will be selected at random from all valid entries. Competition promoted by H Bauer Publishing t/a Empire ("Empire"). Empire's choice of winner is final, and no correspondence will be entered into in this regard. The winner will be notified, via email, between seven and ten days after the competition ends. Empire will email the winner a maximum of three times. If the winner does not respond to the message within 14 days of the competition's end, Empire will select another winner at random and the original winner will not win a prize. Empire is not responsible for late delivery or unsatisfactory quality of the prize. Entrants agree to the collection of their personal data in accordance with Empire's privacy policy: http://www.bauerdatapromise.co.uk/. Winner's personal details will be given to prize provider to arrange delivery of the prize. Bauer reserves the right to amend or cancel these terms or any aspect of the competition (including the prize) at any time if required for reasons beyond its control. Any questions, please email empire@bauermedia.co.uk. Complaints will not be considered if made more than 30 days after the competition ends. Winner's details available on request (after the competition ends) by emailing empire@bauermedia.co.uk. For full T&Cs see http://www.bauerlegal.co.uk/competition-terms.html

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CLASSIC SCENE

THE SALOON SHOWDOWN

Unforgiven

CHOSEN BY
JEREMY SAULNIER
(DIRECTOR)

Jeremy Saulnier: "I remember watching *Unforgiven*, which was very much inspiring in how it downscaled and grounded action, and played with tropes and tired scenarios and genres. When William Munny [Clint Eastwood] walks back into the bar as the posse is going to hunt him down, I remember, the hair on the back of my neck went straight up. I was physically affected by that choice, and awestruck by that moment. That's something that just lasts forever."

INT. GREELY'S SALOON — NIGHT

Little Bill (Gene Hackman) is addressing a posse of men in Greely's saloon, including the bar owner Skinny (Anthony James). They have spent the day trying to find William Munny.

LITTLE BILL: We're pulling out early in the morning. We're gonna chase these fellas clear down to Texas. So don't spend too much of your own money, right?

The men laugh. None of them see someone lift up a rifle as Little Bill continues to talk.

LITTLE BILL: We'll divide up into four parties, and we'll hit all the farms and the trails to make a big circle.

But now W.W. Beauchamp (Saul Rubinek) notices that someone has come into the saloon, brandishing a rifle. He stands up slowly, in fear and alarm.

LITTLE BILL: And we're bound to come across somebody who's seen these —

Now, we hear the rifle cock. Little Bill turns to see where the sound has come from.

LITTLE BILL: — skunks.

It's William Munny. The saloon falls silent. Munny lowers the rifle towards Little Bill.

MUNNY: Who's the fella owns this shithole?

Nobody replies. Munny gestures to someone.

MUNNY: You, fat man. Speak up.

Still, nobody speaks. Until…

SKINNY: Uh, I own this establishment. Bought it from Greely for a thousand dollars…

Skinny tenses up as Munny points the rifle at him. Munny talks to a guy standing directly behind Skinny.

MUNNY: You better clear out of there.

MAN: Yes, sir.

LITTLE BILL: Just hold it right there. Hold it!

Munny fires, blowing Skinny backwards. Little Bill looks up. Munny cocks the rifle and points it at him.

LITTLE BILL: Well, sir, you are a cowardly son of a bitch. You just shot an unarmed man.

MUNNY: Well, he should've armed himself if he's gonna decorate his saloon with my friend.

LITTLE BILL: You'd be William Munny, out of Missouri. Killer of women and children.

MUNNY: That's right. I've killed women and children. Killed just about everything that walks or crawled at one time or another. And I'm here to kill you, Little Bill. For what you did to Ned. (*Silence for a beat*) You boys better move away.

The men standing next to Little Bill beat a hasty retreat.

LITTLE BILL: Alright, gentlemen, he's got one barrel left. When he fires that, take out your pistols and shoot him down like the mangy scoundrel he is.

Nobody moves a muscle. Bill's bravado falters a little. Munny pulls the trigger. Click.

LITTLE BILL: Misfire! Kill the son of a bitch!

Bill goes for his gun. Beauchamp dives for cover. Munny throws his rifle at Little Bill, who takes out his gun and fires. Munny drops down, and shoots back, hitting Little Bill. That seems to galvanise the posse into action. They fire at Munny, but are aiming wildly. After a brief gunfight, several members of Little Bill's posse lie dead, including the aforementioned "fat man", shot in the back while beating a hasty retreat.

Silence reigns. Munny stands up.

MUNNY: Any man don't wanna get killed, better clear on out the back.

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